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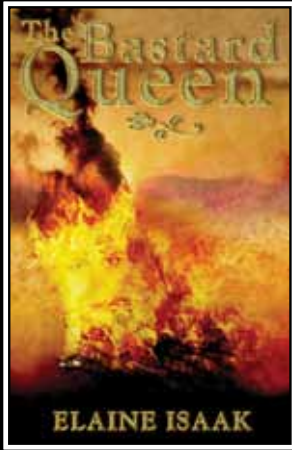
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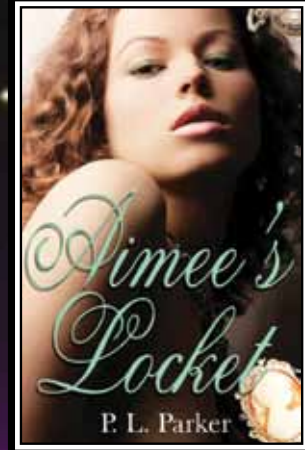
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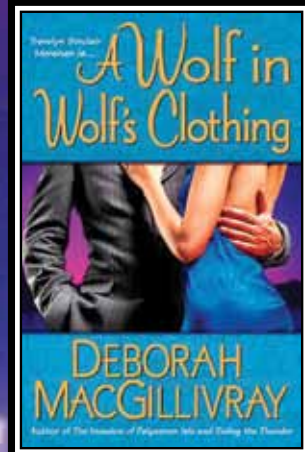
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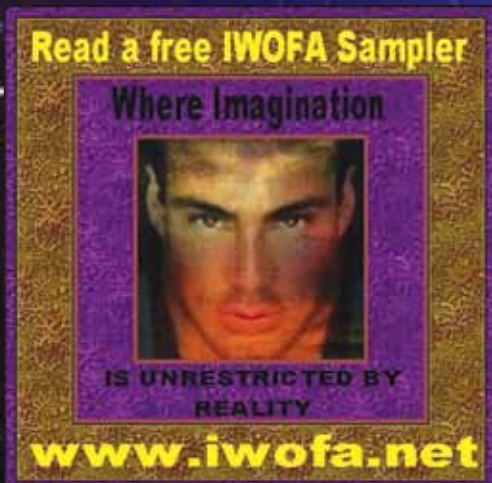
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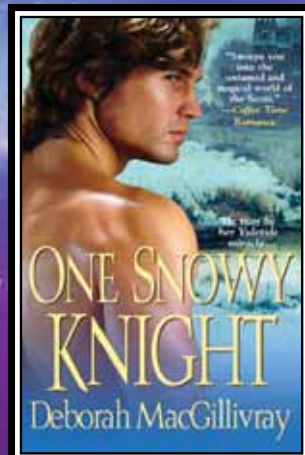


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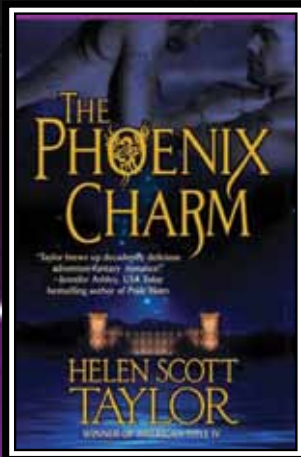
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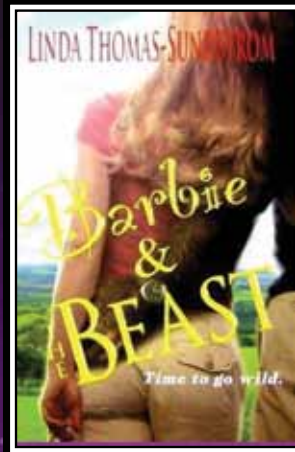
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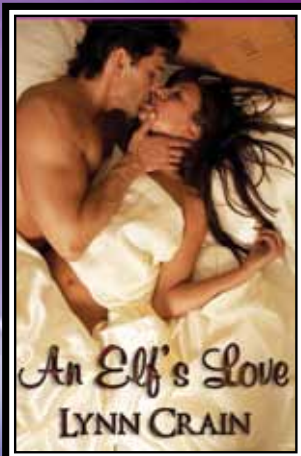
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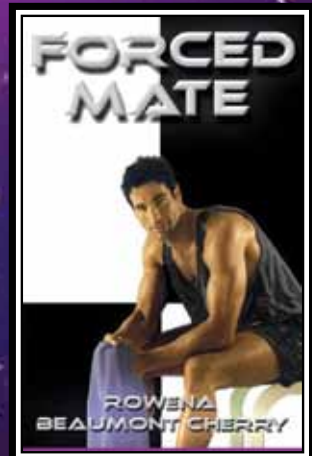
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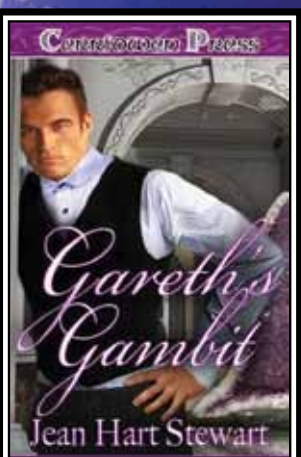
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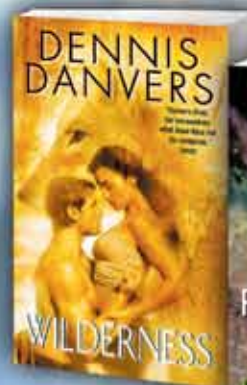


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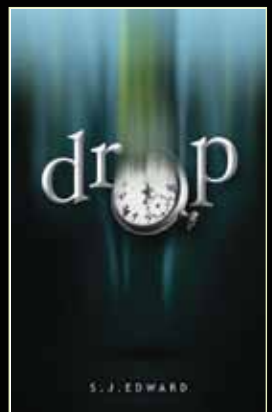
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Games

Batman: Arkham Asylum, Eidos Interactive, ESRB: Teen, \$59.99, Formats available: PC, Playstation 3, Xbox 360. Format reviewed: Xbox 360

Batman has always been a hot property. From the comic books where he first appeared and the kitsch-riddled television series of the sixties, to the blockbuster movies of the last two decades, it has seemed that there hasn't been a medium that Batman couldn't conquer. That is, except for video games. With rare exception, the Caped Crusader's record with gaming has been merely average at best, and often times falling short of even the most modest of standards. Happily, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* defies this troublesome history with a game that is both fun to play and true to Batman's comic book roots. The game opens with Batman delivering the Joker to the staff of Arkham Asylum, Gotham's infamous hospital for the criminally insane. However, once within the confines of the hospital, the Joker, with the help of his fellow inmates, seizes control and embarks on a bloody night of terror and chaos. Batman will need all of his abilities to find the Joker and regain control of the asylum. A brilliant detective and formidable fighter, Batman relies equally on brainpower and brawn to defeat his enemies. Players utilize Batman's special "detective mode" to track enemies, collect forensic samples, and communicate with Oracle, the former Batgirl turned hacker who provides Batman with needed information from outside the asylum. Detective mode also has combat applications, enabling Batman to see his enemies in the dark and through walls, and even to monitor their vital signs and emotional state. The latter might sound strange, but nervous enemies make foolish moves, and Batman capitalizes in keeping his enemies frightened. *Batman: Arkham Asylum* is largely a game of stealth, a lesson that quickly becomes apparent the first time the player tries to steamroll through a mob of machine gun-toting thugs. Success comes through playing to Batman's strengths, and by using misdirection, shadow and silent takedowns to pick off

the Joker's henchmen one by one. This becomes a source of sadistic amusement later in the game when the Joker—watching the action by security camera—starts to use the hospital's PA system to provide a sarcastic play-by-play, taunting and humiliating his terrified henchmen as they're taken down by Batman. Players cash in experience points earned uncovering clues and fighting bad guys to customize Batman with loads of neat gear, like remote-control batarangs, batclaws, extra armor, and high explosives. In addition to all of the great gear, players can also access special combat moves. Particularly striking is the "reverse takedown," which gives Batman the ability to hang upside down from the game's many gargoyles, dropping like a spider to snatch unsuspecting thugs who pass beneath him. These sorts of options greatly enhance the playability of the game by allowing each player to decide for himself how he will meet Arkham Asylum's many challenges. Although stealth is an essential part of successfully beating the game, enemies must still be brought down, and having a full armory of batgear and complementary special moves enables players to use both subtlety and brute force in equal measures. Although run-of-the-mill criminals may be easy prey for Batman, Poison Ivy, Killer Croc, Bane, and other villains from Batman's rogues' gallery lurk within Arkham Asylum's walls, and they're not

Matt Staggs

so easily defeated. Players have to use equal parts creative problem solving and furious button mashing to prevail. What works for one might not work for the other. Arkham Asylum is an enormous place, and Batman is for the most part free to wander its grounds. Although the game can be completed within 20 or 30 hours of play, the environment is full of hidden goodies—like patient interview tapes—that can't possibly all be found in one pass-through. These reveal insights into longtime Batman enemies, including some that aren't even in the game, providing more than enough motivation for fans to log a few extra hours behind Batman's cowl. *Batman: Arkham Asylum* is one of the most immersive, challenging, and visually appealing games to have come down the pipe in years, providing an experience that will appeal to both hardcore comic book collectors and casual fans who only know Batman from movies.

Halo 3: ODST, Microsoft, ESRB: Mature, \$59.99, Formats available: Xbox 360 only

It has been nearly a decade since the release of *Halo: Combat Evolved*, a milestone achievement in first-person shooters that went on to pretty much define the genre for a generation of gamers. Since that time, the game has spawned numerous sequels and spin-off products, including books, comics, action



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figures, and more. It's a rare achievement for a game to ascend to this sort of iconic status, but in many people's estimations, *Halo*, with its extensive mythology and backstory is more than just a mere game. With this sort of success, it would be understandable for the team at Bungie to play it safe and stick with what has worked in the past, but with the release of *Halo 3: ODST*, Bungie shows that it's comfortable taking a few chances with its most successful product and, for the most part, these chances pay off. In *Halo 3: ODST* the player steps away from series hero Master Chief and into the boots of "the Rookie," an inexperienced soldier separated from his comrades during a drop into the battle of New Mombasa. Knocked unconscious during his landing, the Rookie comes to six hours into combat operations and from there has to find his way to the rest of his team. Most of the game's action occurs in flashback sequences triggered when the Rookie discovers a piece of the team's discarded equipment or some other clue left behind during the course of the main battle, but there's plenty of street-level fighting as he tries to make it from one place to the next. Playing through each of the flashback vignettes fleshes out the main story while also giving the player an opportunity to cycle through most of the game's weapons and vehicles. Gameplay is fairly straight-forward, mostly a lot of running and gunning, albeit with a few major differences from previous *Halo* entries. For one thing, the Rookie isn't as powerful as Master Chief. Without the benefit of powerful shields and near limitless endurance, players have to be a

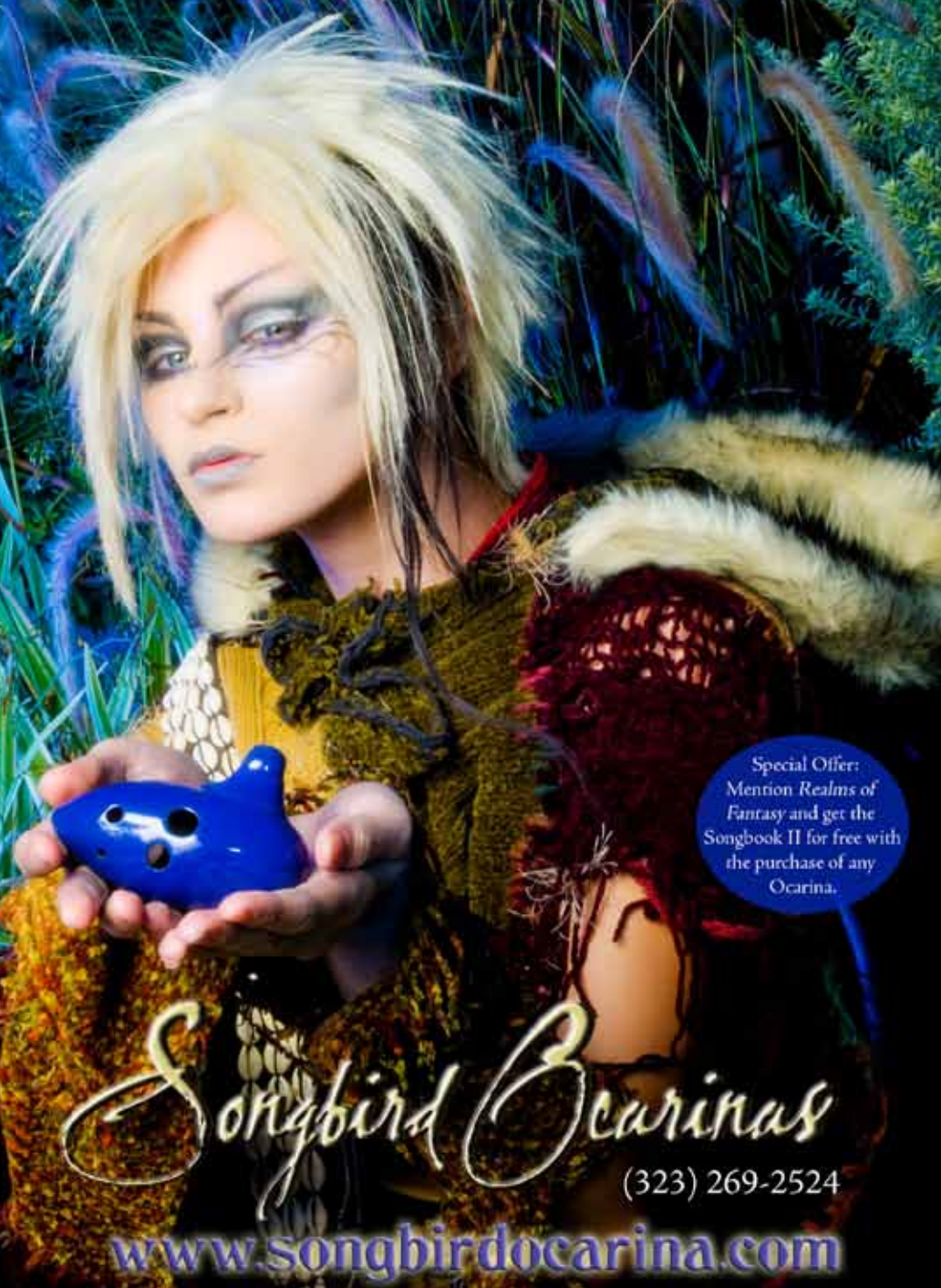
little bit more careful when shooting it out with the bad guys. The ODST guys also can't jump as far as the Spartans of earlier entries. In their favor, though, ODST troopers have access to a special heads-up display called VISR. Once activated, the display system makes it easier to spot friends and foes by outlining them in bright green or red, respectively. VISR also receives and displays intelligence updates, maps, and tactical information. ODST also receives two new weapons: a silenced submachine gun and pistol that, while not especially high-powered, can be zoomed in on a target's head for additional damage. In any case, players don't have to rely solely on these weapons and can expect to pick up plenty of other types of guns along the way, including Covenant weaponry dropped by downed foes. When it comes to its vocal casting, *Halo 3: ODST* boasts some heavy firepower. Former *Firefly* cast members Nathan Fillion, Alan Tudyk, and Adam Baldwin, along with *Battlestar Galactica*'s Tricia Helfer all voice members of the ODST expedition, and while it's great to have this sort of talent on board, the only drawback is that the game's creaky character rendering is made even more noticeable by contrast. It seems that the appearance of waxen, robotic-looking faces is especially jarring when paired with such recognizable voices. Speaking of sound, *Halo 3: ODST* features a wonderful score: a moody, noirish composition occasionally reminiscent of Vangelis's *Blade Runner* score. Mostly, it's a great accompaniment to roaming the dark, rain-slick streets of New Mombasa, but sometimes it doesn't synch up so well.

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Suffice it to say that nothing can kill the suspense of a heated firefight quicker than the soft, soulful sounds of a saxophone solo. If there's a major criticism to be leveled at *Halo 3: ODST*, it's that the single-player campaign can be finished in about 6 hours or so: not a lot of game time for the money. Fortunately, there's an additional multiplayer mode called "Firefight" to explore, and it is almost enough fun on its own to make up for this shortfall. Firefight is similar to *Left 4 Dead*'s "Survival Mode" in that it pits up to four players together in a fight against never-ending, randomly generated waves of Covenant forces. This is bundled with a complete set of *Halo 3* multiplayer maps on a second disc. Whether this makes up for selling *Halo 3: ODST* at the same price point as a completely new game is up for debate. Longtime *Halo* fans will have already bought these multiplayer maps the first time around, and this leaves *Halo 3: ODST* in the unusual position of being a game that's likely to appeal most to people who already have the majority of the content it offers. While the *Halo* faithful will probably consider this purchase worthwhile, casual gamers and those new to the *Halo* franchise would probably be better off renting this one, or purchasing one of the older titles in the series instead.

***Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms*, Ethan Gilsdorf, The Lyons Press, Guilford, CT, hardcover, 336 pp., \$24.95, ISBN: 978-159921-4801**

Ethan Gilsdorf had a respectable adult life. As a successful forty-something-year-old, he had a loving girlfriend, a prestigious position as a college instructor, and a growing reputation as a gifted poet and author. However, no matter how successful Gilsdorf became, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing. He wouldn't be the first middle-aged man to feel that way, but where others might have sought to remedy their midlife crisis through the purchase of an expensive sports car or by throwing themselves into golf or sailing, Gilsdorf chose a different path: he chose fantasy. It all started the day he found an old box of his *Dungeons & Dragons* books and dice. An avid player throughout his youth, Gilsdorf had left the hobby behind as part of his shamefully geeky past. Having taken great pains to recast himself as a hip young adult, Gilsdorf had buried any and all interest in fantasy. He had not always been successful in doing so, though. For years he had quietly fed a growing obsession with Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, hiding the

extent of his fandom from colleagues and friends whom he suspected would never understand. Like a lot of people, Gilsdorf had bought into the conventional thinking that dungeons, dragons, hobbits, and elves were the province of children and childish adults, and that growing up meant putting such things away forever. Finding his old *D&D* books got him thinking again about his past, and reconsidering his own relationship to fantasy. As a teenager, taking to *Dungeons & Dragons* had been as much of a survival strategy as an enjoyable pastime. When he was twelve, Gilsdorf's mother suffered a brain aneurysm that left her partially crippled and mentally shattered. Her erratic behavior and unpredictable mood made her a stranger to her children. Gilsdorf grew to love fantasy gaming because it gave him an opportunity to escape from a world where he was powerless and frightened. Now an adult, Gilsdorf had questions about what role fantasy could and should play in his life, and like his old *D&D* characters, he set out on a quest to find the answers. His journey took him around the world, from the basement of his local hobby shop to the mountains of New Zealand. Gilsdorf lived as a monk at the Society for Creative Anachronism's huge yearly gathering, Pennsic War. He spent a weekend in the woods playing a Live Action Role-Playing game (LARP).

He played tabletop role-playing games and video games and made a journey to Great Britain to speak with Tolkien scholars. Where there is a story to be found, Gilsdorf found it, talking to fantasy enthusiasts from all walks of life. Not all of the stories covered in *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks* are happy ones: there are those who succumb to the dark side of escapism, neglecting their loved ones and themselves, their lives swallowed whole by the likes of *World of Warcraft* or LARPs. The majority, though, find a balance between their hobbies and their responsibilities. Many of them even find love and a sense of community in fandom, something formerly missing in their everyday lives. All of them find their pursuits rewarding, and through their stories show Gilsdorf—and the reader, too—that there’s no reason to be ashamed, and that a rich fantasy life can be compatible with a successful adult life. Even if these are lessons the reader already knows, anyone with even a passing interest in fantasy games should pick this up. *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming*

Geeks provides a unique and affectionate overview of fantasy gaming from the trenches.

***Scary Tales, Deck One: Little Red vs. Pinocchio*, designed by Reiner Knizia, published by Playroom Entertainment, \$15.00**

Players take control of fairy tale characters and battle it out for control of magical relics in legendary designer Reiner Knizia’s new card and dice game *Scary Tales*. *Scary Tales* is currently available in two different starter sets: *Little Red vs. Pinocchio* and *Snow White vs. The Giant*. Alone, each game is designed for use by two players, but both sets can be combined to accommodate up to four. Each set comes in an attractive full-color box constructed of durable, heavy-weight cardboard that feels substantial enough to withstand a moderate amount of abuse, making it a good choice for families. Some games are packed so flimsily that they’re not really suitable for use on the go, for taking to a party or on a road trip; but *Scary Tales*,

with its high-quality construction and modest size would seem ideal for just such a thing. Packed inside are seven dice, a rules pamphlet, and 55 colorful cards. All of the cards are illustrated by Randy Martinez and Jessica R. E. Bethke. Readers may recognize Martinez’s work from the Topps Company’s *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Heroes* trading card lines. They’re full-color and depict dark but cartoonish takes on common fairy tale tropes. While they are a little edgy, they aren’t so scary as to be inappropriate for young children. The dice are color-coded and custom printed with clovers, daggers, eyes, and glowing orbs that represent magic. Each player gets three of the seven dice, with the remaining die designated the “fairy die,” control of which fluctuates between the players, and can bring temporary advantages to either. The players also choose one of two character cards which depict the combatants and list one-use special abilities he or she can call upon during the course of play, and share a fairy card which is matched to the fairy

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die. Also included are 24 fortune cards and 28 power cards, which are shuffled and placed into separate decks during play. Fortune cards change play in some crucial way any time that they're drawn. These include relic, companion, and event cards. Example relics include "Grandma's Glasses," "Geppetto's Boat," or "Woodsman's Axe." Companions, like Pinocchio's friend the cricket, or Red Riding's protector the woodsman,

provide extra bonuses to gameplay when they're used. When drawn, the event cards introduce a variety of effects, both good and bad. Some allow a player to gain control over the fairy card and die while others can cause either player to lose their relics or powers. The power cards are categorized as either creatures, like imps, owls, ogres, and elves, or influences, which allow the player to make extra attacks, reroll losing dice rolls, or swap out old creature cards for new ones. The game begins with each player choosing a character card. He or she is then randomly dealt one fortune card. If an event card is drawn, it is shuffled back into the fortune deck and the player draws again. This continues until he or she draws a relic card. An exception is made for companion cards: if a companion card is drawn, the player may keep it, but continues to draw until a relic is received. Both players have to begin play with one relic. After this requirement is met, the players are randomly dealt five power cards. Play begins with a player examining his or her opponent's relic. Relics have differing numerical values, and the goal of the game is to be the first player to wrest control of seven points worth of relics from his or her opponent. Each relic is marked with some combination of the same symbols that are on the dice that come with the game. The player's power cards are marked with these symbols as well. An opponent's relic may be won by matching these symbols through playing an appropriate creature card from the power deck and rolling the dice for the rest of the symbols. The fairy card, if

currently controlled by the attacking player, adds an extra die to his or her roll. If all of the symbols on the player's card and dice can be matched to those on the relic card, it is won and its value added to the player's score. If the symbols can't be matched, then the attack is a failure unless the player has an influence card that will allow him or her to re-roll the dice or try the attack again. If this is not the case, then it becomes the opponent's turn. Once both players have made an attack, each draws a fortune card and a power card and adds it to their hands. The game continues in this manner until a player achieves victory. Games usually run about twenty minutes long. Some degree of strategy is needed to win *Scary Tales*, but the constant die rolling brings a significant degree of luck into the equation. The rules are fairly easy to master, and although the accompanying booklet states that the game is suitable for players age thirteen or older, a particularly precocious nine- or ten-year-old could probably pick it up fast, making *Scary Tales* a good choice for parents looking for a game they can play with their children.

Matt Staggs is Realms of Fantasy's games reviewer and also a regular contributor of fiction reviews. When he's not reading, writing or gaming, Matt enjoys spending time with his wife and surfing the web. If you'd like to send Matt a book or game for review, contact him at mattormeg@gmail.com. b



Their goal was to focus on the story of a lost, missing girl and reclaiming her. At the same time, the tone and pace of the movie is that of a thriller.

It's been seven years since Alice Sebold's first novel, *The Lovely Bones*, became a national #1 bestseller and won the American Booksellers Association Book of the Year Award. This well loved novel is narrated by Susie Salmon, the ghost of a murdered 14-year-old girl who watches from her own personal heaven as the family and friends she left behind cope with her death while the cops try to catch her killer. Director Peter Jackson (*The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *King Kong*) brings his adaptation of Sebold's novel to theaters as a Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks SKG release, scheduled to open on December 11 in New York And Los Angeles, then nationwide in January. Unlike Jackson's previous blockbuster epics, *The Lovely Bones* promises to be a smaller and more intimate movie.

Screenwriter and co-producer Philippa Boyens is a longtime member of Jackson's team and also worked on *The Lord of the Rings* movies as well as *King Kong*. She's the one who first took notice of Sebold's novel.

"I picked it up at Heathrow airport when I was coming back from doing *The Two Towers*," Boyens says. "I was really tired and wanted a really great book to read. I'd read a great review of [*The Lovely Bones*], so I'd heard of it. I grabbed it off the shelf. It was the classic thing: I got off a plane in New Zealand, which is a really long flight, and I'd finished the book—I couldn't put it down. It really affected me."

When fellow screenwriter and producer Fran Walsh returned from working on *The Two Towers*, Boyens encouraged her to read *The Lovely Bones*. "Not that she had any time," Boyens says, laughing. "But I said, 'You should read it because it's very beautiful, and I think you'd love it.' And I had no notion of it as a film. I just thought she would love it, which she did."

Walsh then wondered if anyone had

picked up the movie rights to Sebold's book, discovering it had indeed been optioned by someone else. Walsh and Boyens let go of the idea of adapting the novel they loved. Years later, their manager called with the news that the movie rights had become available once more and asked if they were interested in acquiring them. In the midst of working on *King Kong*, they quickly agreed, and *The Lovely Bones* became theirs to adapt. Part of the process included working with author Alice Sebold.

"We met with her several times," Boyens says. "She's wonderful. She's just amazing. We were always in contact with her. She didn't want to work with us as in 'sit in the room while we're trying to work out the story.' But she really whole-heartedly embraced the whole notion of handing over her beautiful baby to us, which was great. We felt incredibly honored and still do. I think she's an incredibly brave person."

That courage included the willingness to let the filmmakers tell the story in the way best suited for the screen. Part of that is deciding what to keep and

what's expendable. "We were really, really conscious of wanting to serve Alice's vision and to get that right and to honor that, if you will," Boyens says. "But you also are incredibly aware of the practicalities of making a book work on film."

Boyens says their goal was to focus on the story of a lost, missing girl and reclaiming her. At the same time, the tone and pace of the movie is that of a thriller. And despite the serious nature of the story, it's not meant to be maudlin. In fact, Susie's sense of humor goes a long way to give the movie balance. Part of making it all work was finding the right actors, and one of the most important casting decisions was choosing the teenager who would play Susie Salmon.

The filmmakers assumed the process would be long and difficult, so they set up casting agents in London, New York, Los Angeles, and Australia. But to everyone's surprise, they immediately found the Susie they were looking for in Ireland's Saoirse Ronan, who had submitted a tape through the British casting agent. At that time, Ronan had



Photo Credit: Dreamworks Studios Stanley Tucci stars as George Harvey in DreamWorks Pictures' drama "The Lovely Bones," a Paramount Pictures release. Copyright© 2009 DW STUDIOS L.L.C. All Rights Reserved.

already starred in *Atonement*, for which she received an Oscar nomination as Best Supporting Actress. But when she submitted the tape to audition for the role of Susie, *Atonement* hadn't been released yet, making her a virtual unknown.

But because the filmmakers discovered Ronan's audition tape just a day or two into the casting process, they hesitated to believe their good fortune, wondering whether they should continue the casting process for as long as they'd originally planned. "It just became obvious," Boyens says about stumbling upon Ronan's tape so early in the game. "This girl is phenomenal and is meant to play this role. We had a meeting with her in London. She's incredibly bright and probably the most naturally gifted actor I think we've ever worked with. A lot of heart. Incredible range. She's since gone from there to play a little Scot girl in the 19th century to an American in a fantasy movie. Her range is extraordinary. We felt that even though she was this young Irish girl, we knew that she could play Susie."



Photo Credit: Dreamworks Studios Stanley Tucci stars as George Harvey in DreamWorks Pictures' drama "The Lovely Bones," a Paramount Pictures release. Copyright© 2009 DW STUDIOS L.L.C. All Rights Reserved.

Another challenge was figuring out how to tell the story. Most movies have linear narratives, and Sebold's novel jumps around in time and space. Susie remembers her past and the fact that she was on the verge of her first love with a classmate when she was murdered. She remembers that on the night of her death, her spirit unintentionally swept past another classmate who could have been a friend if Susie were alive. And then there's the family that Susie leaves behind. Her father, an accountant who loves building ships in bottles. Her mother, whose secret self Susie once captured in a photograph. Her larger-than-life grandmother who rises up to the occasion of holding the family together in unexpected ways. Her sister and brother, who struggle to navigate the wake of their sister's death. In the novel, Susie constantly switches gears and studies all of them in the past and present.

But the filmmakers also had to make sure Susie herself was more active in the story. "Susie's voice in heaven in the book is quite observational," Boyens says. "It's brilliant the way that Alice uses it, but that doesn't work so well on film. You can't have it just as a passive person in heaven watching in the same way on film as it works in the book. You need to see how she's engaging with what's happening on Earth. We discovered we needed a mystery story that Susie has of her own. There's a reason she stuck with

the Earth, and that's what she needs to find out."

When Susie dies, she doesn't quite make it all the way to heaven. Instead, she finds herself stuck in an in-between place that serves as her personal heaven, sort of like ordering a personal-size pizza instead of ordering a large one and sharing it with others. In trailers, her personal heaven appears as a magical and dream-like place, evoking the same kind of wonder as the surrealistic scenes Jackson created for *Heavenly Creatures*, the film for which he first gained international attention. "Pete had a lot to do with it," Boyens says about the design of Susie's own slice of heaven. "It had to be personal to her, but it had to be a place that was part of the storytelling. It couldn't just be a waypoint or a point from which she observed everything. We always thought, when we first read the book, that this is an in between.

"It was very hard though, I have to say, to get right. The notion of the in between is very personal. Everybody has a different notion, I should think, of what it's like. So in the end, I think the idea of heaven or what Alice calls in the book 'wide, wide heaven'—that's what the real journey is for. You never see it. It's there and it's beautiful. And in the end, it's where she really wants to be, which is free—completely free."

From Susie's own special "in between" place, she can go back to Earth to visit

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her family, even though they can't see her. But eventually a few of them begin to sense her presence, and she tries to guide them toward catching her killer, who happens to be one of their neighbors. Much of the story's tension comes from watching the grief of Susie's family and the police's attempts to find her murderer when he lives so close by and has polished to perfection his act of innocence.

After all, Susie isn't the first girl he's murdered.

"The biggest challenge ultimately was going to be that incredible ending," Boyens says about adapting the novel. "You're going on a journey, and it's one of the things that attracted us to the book. You really think you're going on a murder mystery—you know who did it, but is he going to be caught? And the way in which you ask the audience to follow you through that and the twists that you have with that genre storytelling was also going to be our biggest challenge and making it work so the audience goes with her decision. That quest at the end. Earning that. In the end, it informed us as to what the film was and the story that we were making. There was no trial for this man. But Fran said to me really early on, 'It's the trial of a loving heart over an empty one.'"

The empty heart belongs to Susie's neighbor, George Harvey (played by Stanley Tucci of *Big Night*), a warped man with a warped past. His neighbors perceive him as a quiet oddball who

makes his living building dollhouses. But George's life is filled with dark secrets, and he's learned how to keep them hidden. Sebold's novel shows Susie getting glimpses of George's past and the incidents that shaped him.

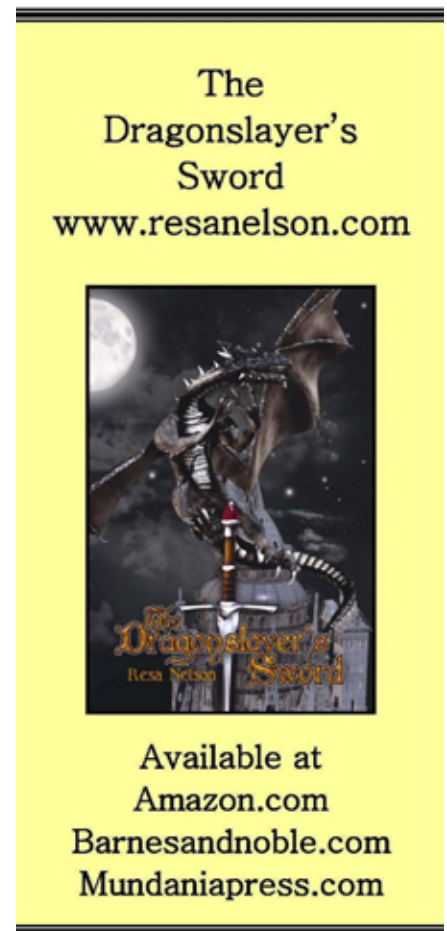
Despite his timid appearance, George is bold, making brazen moves even while the police are swarming all around him and never dreaming he's anything more than a harmless eccentric. He kills Susie in an empty field on the edge of the neighborhood and removes her body as the police close in, deftly destroying any evidence that could lead to him. Those who have seen Tucci's portrayal of this chilling character rave about his performance. It's enough to wonder if there could be an Oscar nomination in his future.

"In the end, you can't ever bring her back," Boyens says about Susie. "But the love that surrounded her—that can never be diminished by this man. In the end, we came to understand—this happens every day—it's about Susie reclaiming herself from this man. Taking herself back. That she's not just a murder victim. So that was something that I think Alice felt quite strongly about and one of the reasons that she wrote this book. It was because, for her, so often these are nameless girls. And so often their names are tied to their killer. They're marched through history alongside the names of people like Ted Bundy. It's not who these women were. That's what in the end it became. And showing the emptiness and

the bleakness of this man's life. In the end, that's her triumph. We just hope that people get that from the film.

"I felt incredibly honored to work on this. It's a beautiful story. You fall in love with the characters. We try really hard. It's not always what you think it's going to be and it's not always exactly what you want, but we do try really, really hard to make it work."

Resa Nelson has been the TV/Movie columnist for *Realms of Fantasy* magazine since 1999. She is a SFWA member and a Clarion graduate. Her first novel, *The Dragonslayer's Sword* (published by Mundania Press), was a Finalist for the 2009 EPPIE Award for Best Fantasy Novel and is the first novel in her Dragonslayer series. Her next novel is a standalone novel: *Our Lady of the Absolute* is scheduled for publication in mid-2010. Nelson's short fiction has been published in *Science Fiction Age*, *Fantasy*, *MZB's Sword and Sorceress XXIII*, and other magazines and anthologies. Visit her website and blog at www.resanelson.com. ☛



HARRY POTTER EXHIBITION

ON TOUR

Following in the footsteps of museum exhibitions based on movies like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*, Harry Potter: The Exhibition is currently on tour. The exhibition premiered in April 2009 in Chicago and has now moved to the Museum of Science in Boston, its only New England venue, where it opened on October 25 and will run through February 21, 2010. At press time, no other cities have been announced for the tour of Harry Potter: The Exhibition. However, exhibitions like this one tend to run over the course of a few years and travel to several cities. Stay up to date on where and when this exhibition will appear in future months and years by visiting <http://www.harrypotterexhibition.com/>.

This isn't just a simple display of items used in the movies. It's a theatrical experience that evokes emotion. When visitors walk from one exhibit to another, the lighting is often dark and mysterious, making it easy

to imagine leaving the world of Muggles and entering a world of wizards. In addition to sight, the exhibition taps into the senses of sound, touch, and even smell. There are even some elements that add a magical flair, such as portraits hanging on a hallway wall at Hogwarts ... and some of them really move. For these reasons, every Harry Potter fan can count on more than merely gazing at treasured items from the books and films.

Walking through the exhibition is a story in itself, and the theme of that story is "a day in the life of Harry Potter." After witnessing the impressive powers of the Sorting Hat (as it evaluates a few lucky individuals) and then viewing a series of screens featuring clips from the films, visitors find themselves momentarily blinded by the headlight on the steaming engine of the Hogwarts Express. Walking past the train, the first step is into Hogwarts itself, echoing the early scenes of each Harry Potter movie to date. Artifacts are



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grouped into sections. After glimpsing items from each course taught at Hogwarts, there's a Quidditch area leading visitors to walk through Hagrid's Hut, the Forbidden Forest,



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a Dark Arts section, and ending in the Great Hall at Hogwarts. One of the highlights is the self-guided audio tour, a collection of behind-the-scenes stories about specific artifacts told by filmmakers and creators of costumes and props.

A Gryffindor area includes a slice of the boys' dorm room complete with a couple of four-poster beds, nightstands, Ron Weasley's trunk (filled with books about Quidditch and a Chudley Cannons t-shirt signed by team members), and scads of costumes and props like bottled pumpkin juice, the time turner used by Hermione to jump around in time in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, wands, and cauldrons. Nearby is the Howler from Mrs. Weasley delivered to Ron at Hogwarts by owl, and the audio tour story behind the Howler explains how its design was inspired by origami.

The tour of Hogwarts begins with a section centered around Professor Gilderoy Lockhart (played by Kenneth Branagh in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*) and the Defense Against the Dark Arts course that he taught. Visitors get a close look at a few of the costumes Branagh wore, which are rich in detail and meticulously made. Also on display are several framed photographs of Lockhart, several of the books he authored, his wand, and the enormous painting of Lockhart painting a portrait of himself. But one of the funniest artifacts in this exhibit is Lockhart's "Defence Against the DARK ARTS Second Year Essential Knowledge Test." Long scrolls of paper reveal questions such as asking Professor Lockhart's favorite color (the student who filled out this particular exam answered "Lilac"), his secret ambition (to rid the world of evil), and his best side for being photographed (all sides are equally good because he is so beautiful).

Matthew Lewis (who plays Neville Longbottom in the series) arrived in Boston a few days before the exhibition opened to

the public, hand delivering Neville's wand so that it can be added to one of the displays. Lewis toured the exhibition, saying that he was stunned by its size and scale. Lewis said the exhibition gave him the same feeling he had when he arrived on the Harry Potter set for the first time. "I hope people get to experience what we experience every day," Lewis said.

He also discovered a prop that ended up on the cutting room floor: Neville's dancing shoes. Lewis explained that he and other cast members spent two months learning how to tango for a dance scene that was never used. "I can't dance," Lewis said, despite the fact that Neville is supposed to dance as well as Fred Astaire. Lewis pointed out that because Harry Potter and Ron Weasley are supposed to be terrible dancers, Daniel Radcliffe and Rupert Grint faced no real challenge in this scene while Lewis struggled. Although the scene was dropped, visitors can get a good look at the shiny black patent leather shoes Lewis wore.

Visitors can rest assured that among the 200 props and costumes there are plenty of items that play key roles in the movies, including the letter Harry first received inviting him to attend Hogwarts, some of the gigantic chess pieces from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the sorcerer's stone itself, Tom Riddle's diary (punctured by a Basilisk fang), the TriWizard Cup, the Marauder's Map, Harry's Nimbus 2000 broomstick, and Harry's glasses and wand. There's even the detention desk and the paper on which Dolores Umbridge told Harry to write "I must not tell lies." One of the most striking experiences is seeing costumes worn by Radcliffe, Grint, and Emma Watson throughout all the films, because these outfits reflect how young these actors were in the first movie and how much they've grown over the years. Because *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince* is still in production, it isn't represented yet but it's likely that in the near future costumes and props from this movie will be added to the exhibition. ☛

Winged Victory

by L. F. Hampton

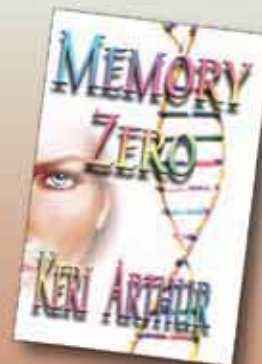


Abbie Brown journeys to Valtar, an ancient, male dominated world, hoping to discover why the Valtarie face extinction. Despite their looks, the silver-winged Valtarie are not angels, but the race can't really be vampires, can they?

Traveen, second son of Valtar's ruler, pilots the crystal ship escorting Abbie. Valtarie Law forbids males to touch a female, and to do so means death. When a storm forces them to crash land on a deserted ice planet, Traveen has no choice but to touch Abbie to keep her alive. Abbie rescues Traveen from execution, but when they flee Valtar, they are both under a death sentence because every planet in the universe will kill a Valtarie on sight.

Memory Zero

by Keri Arthur



For Sam Ryan, life began at the age of fourteen. She has no memory of her parents or her past. For the ten years Sam's been with the State Police, she's used their resources to search for any clues to her identity, but it's as if all mention of her family has been deliberately wiped off the system. Everything changes the night she agrees to meet her missing partner, Jack.

She barely survives his attempt to kill her, and she kills him instead. As Sam delves into her partner's death, she discovers that not only is her partner very much alive, but he's involved in an organization that plans a war on the human race. Worse, someone knows the truth about Sam's past, and it appears that they'd rather see her dead than have her uncover it.

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Do You Know Jack?

Bill Willingham's multiple-Eisner-award-winning comic book series, *Fables*, begins with a young man urging a New York cab driver to go faster. Readers are soon introduced to the near-frantic passenger: Jack, a former fairy-tale hero who has been expelled from his homeland by the mysterious "Adversary," and who is living in exile in New York City. Jack is joined in his predicament by such fairy-tale regulars as Beauty and the Beast, Snow White, the Frog Prince, the Three Little Pigs, and the Big Bad Wolf. Through multiple storylines, Jack remains one of the series' most compelling characters, and eventually spins off into his own comic series, *Jack of Fables*, in which he is revealed to be not only the nursery-rhyme star of "Little Jack Horner" and "Jack Be Nimble," but also the sword-wielding hero of "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "Jack the Giant-Killer."

What makes Jack such a Protean, wide-ranging hero? Folklore aficionados would not be surprised at such multiplication; a 1940s anthology, Richard Chase's *The Jack Tales*, presents Jack as the quintessential American hero. But even before that, in the world of English-language fairy tales, Jack was a uniquely popular protagonist, the central figure in a wide variety of adventure tales, wherever English was spoken. From John o' Groats to Land's End, from Belfast to Cork, and most especially from Canada to the southern Appalachians, Jack is our favorite folktale hero, a clever, lucky, generous, and well-endowed Everyman.

Of course, there isn't just one Jack. In some tales, Jack is an only child who lives alone with his mother. In others, he has two older brothers, Will and Tom, and two living parents. In still others, his mother is dead, and he is at the mercy of an evil stepmother. Jack is sometimes a fool, sometimes average, sometimes the cleverest boy in town.

Traditional storytellers have their own ways of dealing with Jack's multiple lives; some of them try to reconcile their stories to provide a clear biography for Jack, while others embrace his variety. Folklorist Bill Nicolaisen (1978, 36) once asked North Carolina narrator Marshall Ward why Jack seems to get married over and over again in the stories. Ward answered, "This ain't the same Jack. These stories are one hundred, two hundred, three hundred years apart."

LUCKY JACK

Despite the divergent storylines and life circumstances we find in Jack Tales, folklorists have found common ground in most of them: Jack is one lucky customer. C. Paige Gutierrez (1978) identified three types of luck in North Carolina Jack Tales, and these seem to apply to other Jacks as well. Sometimes, Jack's luck is mere chance,

as in Andrew Stewart's Scottish version of "Jack and the Three Feathers" (Various Artists 2000). In this long, magic tale, Jack throws a feather in the air and follows it to its landing, there to discover a magic frog who helps him win the kingdom. The feather seems to have been directed by pure chance.

In other stories, Jack's luck is linked to his virtue, as in Edna Carter's Virginia version of "Jack and the Beggar" (Perdue 1987, 50-51). In this story, Jack is kind to a beggar and a stray dog, who turn out to be the ghosts of a rich man and his pet. The ghosts lead him to the rich man's hidden treasure, explaining that they chose him "because he'd took in a poor beggar an' a homeless dog." Is Jack lucky in this tale? Certainly; after all, of all people, the ghosts decide to test him. But Jack is also kindhearted, and this is what wins the day.

Still other times, Jack's luck is helped along by skill and cleverness. In Ray Hicks's (1977) North Carolina version of "Jack and the Three Steers," for example, Jack is ordered by a gang of vicious thieves to steal three steers, on pain of death. Jack looks around for tools to help him in his task. His luck goes only so far; all he finds are a short hank of rope and an abandoned slipper. Of course, the real fun of the tale is in his cleverness; listeners thrill to hear how the ingenious Jack uses these seemingly useless items to trick a farmer into abandoning his cattle.

Storytellers, too, recognize Jack's constant good luck. In 1939, Tennessee tale-teller Sam Harmon remarked to collector Herbert Halpert (1943, 187), "If I was to name my boys over, I'd name all of them Jack. I never knowed a Jack but what was lucky."

THE BLOOD OF AN ENGLISHMAN

In some ways, Jack's popularity is not unique to English. Jack is a diminutive of John, and folktale Jack thus shares his name with German Hans or Hansel (derived from "Johannes," German for John) and French Ti Jean, literally "petit





Jean,” or “little John.” Both of these are common folktale protagonists, and both have emerged into popular culture; to pick only two of numerous examples, the playwright and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott wrote a play called *Ti Jean and his Brothers* (Harrison 1989, 91-153), and Engelbert Humperdinck’s opera *Hansel and Gretel* is a popular Christmas staple. Nor were these connections unknown to ordinary people; the Franco-American writer Jean-Louis Kerouac was nicknamed “Ti Jean” in French, “Jack” in English.

Similarly, Spanish tales about “Juan” and Russian stories about “Ivan” share roots with Jack. Even a unique, iconic character like Pinocchio has some European Jack in him; folklorist Jack Zipes (1999, 145) tells us that Carlo Collodi’s 1882 novel, which introduced the famous puppet, was written after Collodi completed a number of books about “Giannettino,” or “little John,” and was based on his reading of Jack Tales.

Clearly, the Anglo Jack is just one facet of a wider European tradition. However, in other ways, Jack is especially English, and deeply embedded in the psyche of English-speakers. The very word “Jack” has taken many forms and many meanings in English. The name has come to mean a man in general (“man-jack,” “jack-of-all-trades”), a worker (lumberjack, Jack Tar), a useful tool (jackknife,

hydraulic jack), and a fool (jackanapes, jackass). It makes “John,” one of the most common English names, into a diminutive that suggests humility (it probably derives from the earlier form “Jankyn,” and there are several bawdy characters named “Jankyn” in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*). Jack is thus a name for an Anglo-American Everyman, much like the later legal nickname, John Doe. However, “Jack” combines his commonness and humbleness with Englishness; after all, his most famous opponent, the giant, smells the blood not of an Everyman, but of an Englishman.

FROM FARM-BOY TO GIANT-KILLER: EARLY JACK TALES

Jack’s tradition goes back surprisingly far; the earliest Jack Tale is genuinely medieval, and was written down in the fifteenth century. In this story, known originally as “Jack and His Stepdame,” and later as “The Friar and the Boy” (Furrow 1985, 67-153), Jack is a farmer’s son whose stepmother underfeeds him, and wants to send him into indentured servitude. Jack’s father compromises by sending him to a far pasture to watch the cattle. There Jack meets a hungry beggar, with whom he shares his meager lunch. In return, the beggar offers him three gifts. Jack asks for a bow and arrows; the beggar gives him a magical bow and arrows which never miss their mark. Jack asks for a pipe, so that he might have music and be merry. The beggar gives him a magical pipe which compels all who hear it to dance. Jack says that these two gifts are enough, but the beggar insists on a third. Jack remembers the look of hatred that comes to his stepmother’s face whenever she sees him eat; he wishes that, every time she looks at him that way, she will fart so loudly that everyone will hear her. The beggar promises to grant his wish, and departs.

Using the pipe, which causes his father’s cattle to dance along behind him, Jack easily herds the cattle back to their pens, and heads home for supper. Jack’s father invites him to eat, whereupon the stepmother glares at him:

Then she stared in his face

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And soon let go such a blast
That she made them all aghast
That were within that place.
They all laughed at such a game;
The wife instead turned red in shame.
(Furrow 1985: 109-110; my translation)

Soon, she retires for the night, humiliated. The next day, a mendicant friar arrives. Jack's stepmother complains about Jack, and the friar seeks him out in the fields and threatens to beat him. Jack promises that to make amends he will shoot a bird for the friar's dinner. Using his magic bow, he shoots a bird and causes it to fall in a briar thicket. When the friar enters the thicket, Jack begins playing the pipe. This causes the friar to leap and dance, so that he is horribly scratched by the thorns. Jack eventually stops playing and lets the friar go.

The friar returns to Jack's father and stepmother. He reports what Jack has done, and the father demands to hear the pipe. The friar, fearing the music, begs to be tied up, and is tied to a post. Jack begins playing, the whole household begins to dance, and Jack carefully leads them all outside. Soon, all the townspeople are dancing. Everyone has a good time, except the friar, who further injures himself by banging his head against the post, and the stepmother, who cannot help glaring at Jack, and farting. At the end of the dance, the father is amused, the stepmother is chastened, the friar is bruised, and Jack lives happily ever after.

It may be surprising to many people to encounter fart jokes in Jack Tales; most such tales have been cleaned up for publication. But the oral tradition leaves no doubt that Jack could be both scatological and sexual; Vance Randolph, for example, found bawdy versions of Jack Tales alive and well in Missouri and Arkansas in the 1940s (Randolph 1976, 18-19, 47-49). Even the North Carolina tradition documented by Richard Chase had its moments; the story Chase called "Hardy Hard-Head," was, storyteller Ray Hicks insisted, traditionally called "Hardy Hard-Ass," and featured a character whose giant, rock-tough posterior served as a

shield and a battering ram (McCarthy 1994, 10-26). Another Jack Tale was known simply as "Stiff Dick" (Harmon 2001, 3-6), but the character who calls himself "Stiff Dick" is actually named Jack! These off-color touches speak to a long tradition of bawdy Jack Tales that folklorist Joseph Sobol (1992, 98) calls "Fabliau Jack," after a genre of medieval bawdry favored by Chaucer and Boccaccio (there are several bawdy Jankyns in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*).

"Jack and His Stepdame" is as much fairy tale as fabliau, however, and it reveals some of Jack's mythical meaning. Jack's act of kindness results in three gifts from a magical donor—a typical fairy-tale beginning. The gifts include a magical bow, which is a limitless source of food, and a magical musical instrument, which is a limitless source of art. Jack thus returns home with both physical and spiritual nourishment for his community. After the supper and dance, Jack's father says he has not had a better time in seven years, and throughout the community, "every man was of good cheer." Jack can keep his community not only fed, but happy.

The importance of this seems to be understood by the characters in the story. Jack, for example, initially refuses the third gift, since physical nourishment and happiness are enough for anyone, but the beggar presses him. Interestingly, this third gift, the one Jack initially doesn't want or need, transforms the tale from a pure fairy tale into a farcical fabliau. (In all of Randolph's bawdy tales, meanwhile, Jack has an unusually large penis, which suggests another way in which Fabliau Jack is a provider of pleasure.)

The next stage in Jack's development brings him further into the realms of Faerie. "Jack the Giant-Killer" was first printed before 1708. More tellingly, the giant's rhyme, "fee fi fo fum," is much older, having been quoted by Thomas Nashe in 1596 (Opie 1974, 48). It seems very likely from this that some version of the tale predates the eighteenth century.

"Jack the Giant-Killer," or to give it its early literary name, *The History*

of Jack and the Giants (Ashton 1882, 184-192), is an episodic tale in which Jack travels around Britain, especially Cornwall and Wales, killing giants. Some he dispatches with mere violence, for example, by digging a pit trap and then taking a pickaxe to the giant's head. Others, he defeats with clever trickery, as when he fools a hapless giant by apparently cutting open his own stomach; the giant attempts to compete and, in the words of the chapbook, "ripped up his own belly, from the bottom to the top, and out dropped his tripes and his trolly bags, so that hur fell down for dead." (Green 2007, 10)

The History of Jack and the Giants is set "in the reign of King Arthur." This has prompted several scholars, most recently Thomas Green (2007, 1-4), to point out similarities between Jack's exploits and those of the mythical king. In ancient Cornish and Welsh mythology, Arthur slew Britain's last remaining giants, but in the eighteenth century, Jack replaced him as giant-killer. Jack's giant-slaying exploits are strikingly similar to Arthur's, too, prompting Carl Lindahl (1994, xv) to ask: "Has the legendary British king traded his crown for a hoe and become a working-class hero?" It's a hard question to answer, but the connection seems to have been deliberate on the part of the chapbook's author.

At around the same time as *The History of Jack and the Giants*, another tale was making the rounds in the English oral tradition. The 1734 edition of *Round About Our Coal-Fire: or Christmas Entertainments* contains a brief discussion of "Jack Spriggins and the Enchanted Bean," which from its plot is clearly a version of "Jack and the Beanstalk" (Opie 1974, 162). (Interestingly, "Jack and the Beanstalk" was later a popular Christmas pantomime; this shows that its association with the holidays seems to have begun early.) If *The History of Jack and the Giants* places Jack in a mythical time of Arthur, "Jack and the Beanstalk" is a full-blown tale of Faerie, where Jack leaves the ordinary England for an enchanted land in the clouds, in which he slays a giant, and from which

he brings back magic gifts. It's a classic tale that most people know: Jack, who is believed to be a silly and impractical boy, trades his family's cow for some magic beans. His mother believes he has been cheated, and throws the beans out the window. During the night, a giant beanstalk grows up to the sky. Jack climbs the beanstalk three times, each time raiding a giant's castle; he steals a bag of gold, a goose or hen that lays golden eggs, and a harp that plays by itself. On Jack's first two raids, the giant's wife saves him, but on the third, he is pursued by the giant. He chops down the beanstalk, the giant is killed, and Jack and his mother live happily ever after.

Various psychoanalytical interpretations of "Jack and the Beanstalk" (e.g. Bettelheim 1976) have suggested that the beanstalk is a phallic image and the tale is essentially about sexual differentiation from one's parents. The giant is an evil father-figure who has destroyed and replaced Jack's true father—a typical Oedipal fantasy. The giant's wife is a fantasy aspect of Jack's mother, which explains why she helps him to escape her evil husband. In the end, Jack conquers the evil aspects of his father, and in so doing transforms his mother from a woman who must reject his magic by throwing out the beans, into one who can partake of the gifts he brings back. How does Jack reintegrate his family? By destroying his father's phallus—or, at least, by destroying its hold over him.

This interpretation may reveal some of Jack's meanings. However, Jack also has deeper mythical meanings that resonate beyond the psychological. Jack's mythical nature is that of the explorer of other realms, and the slayer of ogres, not just for his own sake but for his community's. As Charles T.



Davis (1978) has recognized, Jack is an "archetypal hero." Like Prometheus stealing fire from Zeus, Jack finds a magical giant in the sky and brings back his treasures. The first time, he brings back only a finite bag of gold, but on his subsequent raids he carries off apparently limitless resources: a goose that lays golden eggs and a harp that sings beautiful music. These gifts, like the bow and the pipe of "Jack and His Stepdame," clearly represent limitless physical and spiritual nourishment for his community. When he has them, in Flora Annie Steel's (1918, 109) telling of the tale, "every one was quite happy," and Jack himself "became quite a useful person."

In these three early Jack Tales, then, we have the germ of Jack's mythical persona. In "Jack and his Stepdame," he is a trickster figure who brings back physical and spiritual sustenance for himself and his community. In "Jack and the Beanstalk," this same theme is made more explicit, since the tale begins with poverty for the family, and ends with abundance. And in "Jack the Giant-Killer," Jack makes the land safe for his community and civilization, destroying the monsters of the encroaching otherworld who seek "the blood of an Englishman." Jack is the provider, protector, and defender of his community, using luck and cleverness, kindness and trickery, to improve the lives of his people.

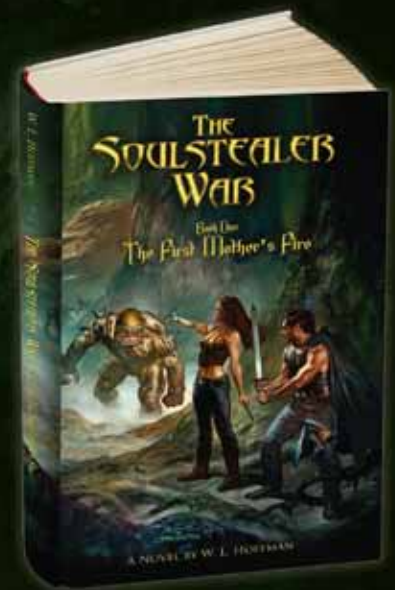
JACK SEEKS HIS FORTUNE

Like Jack himself, Jack Tales soon went out to seek their fortune, traveling to the places where English people settled. When English-speakers crossed the ocean, Jack Tales went with them.

Precisely when Jack Tales came to America will never be determined for sure. Since at least some Jack Tales existed as early as the fifteenth century, they could have made the journey with the earliest English colonists, but they do not appear in the American historical record until the eighteenth century; Dr. Joseph Doddridge (1769–1826) wrote that, before 1783, Jack Tales were known in what was then western Virginia:

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Dramatic narrations, chiefly concerning Jack and the giant, furnished our young people with another source of amusement during their leisure hours. Many of these tales were lengthy, and embraced a considerable range of incident. Jack, always the hero of the story, after encountering many difficulties, and performing many great achievements, came off conqueror of the giant.... Civilization has, indeed, banished the use of those ancient tales of romantic heroism; but what then? It has substituted in their place the novel and romance. (Doddridge 1912, 124)

Of course, Doddridge need not have worried about Jack. The tales have continued to be told in America, until this very day. The heartland of Jack Tales seems to have been the southern Appalachian Mountains, but the tales are found wherever the settlers went, including New York, North Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, Maryland, Missouri, and Pennsylvania (Lindahl 1994, xxi). As Doddridge noted, they contain a wide range of incidents, with Jack sailing in a land-and-water ship, seducing king's daughters, stealing money and cattle, faking his own death, and meeting and defeating giants, ghosts, robbers, unicorns, wild boar, and even Death and the Devil.

Scholars have tried to determine what makes American Jack different from his British and Irish counterparts. W. F. H. Nicolaisen (1978) concludes that British Jack traditions were broad enough that no significant aspects of American Jack are original to America. Carl Lindahl (1994), on the other hand, discovers differences in emphasis: American Jack is far less likely to use magic, for example, and relies instead more on cleverness and his wits. He also finds that, while English Jack is often a poor peasant who is hostile to the wealthier classes, American Jack accepts his place in the social order and often works for and with the wealthy,

hoping, of course, to become wealthy himself. Meanwhile, Julie Henigan (1987) discovers that in America, Jack is likely to end the tale completely independent of his original household, living in a new place with a family of his own. Irish Jack, on the other hand, returns to his homeplace. These differences reflect the various norms within each community where Jack is found.

In fact, Jack reflects the community's norms and its ideals, and is often perceived to be the quintessential member of the community, whatever that community may be. Among the "Travellers" of Scotland, who live a nomadic life similar to gypsies, Jack is a figure to be idealized and emulated. Duncan Williamson, a great



Traveller storyteller, explained, "Jack was the great man. They looked up to him. [...] They visualized themselves as Jack" (McDermitt 1979, 144). In much the same way, on the island of Newfoundland, Jack is seen as a perfect Newfoundlander. "We always felt Jack is a quintessential Newfoundland guy," theater director Andy Jones told the *Memorial University Gazette*. "He has great survival instincts and at the end he does well because he kind of figures out the lay of the land." (Fürst 2009) For traditional Appalachian farming-folk, too, Jack is an empowering example. The late, great Jack Tale teller Ray Hicks, of Beech Mountain, North

Carolina, once told Barbara McDermitt (1983, 9), "Jack ain't dead. He's a-livin'. Jack can be anybody. Like I tell 'em sometimes, I'm Jack. Now I ain't done everything Jack has done in the tales, but still I've been Jack in a lot of ways. It takes Jack to live."

QUITE A USEFUL PERSON: JACK IN LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

Given the popularity of Jack, it's no surprise to see him adapted and used in many works of literature, both fantasy and otherwise. A recreational reader can encounter and enjoy Jack in a variety of guises. Who could doubt, for example, that there's some folktale Jack in Patrick O'Brian's flamboyant English naval captain, Jack Aubrey? Aubrey is a giant-killer who repeatedly defeats massive men-of-war with small, outgunned sloops and frigates, using cleverness and trickery. Aubrey's escapes are narrow and his exploits are sometimes fantastic; in one memorable sequence (O'Brian 1972, 102-113), he is forced to traverse most of France disguised as a bear. But like folktale Jack, he perseveres, venturing into the jaws of danger to bring back the secrets of Napoleon ("The Corsican Ogre"), with the help of his friend, the spy Stephen Maturin. Most tellingly, from the early days of his career, Aubrey is known as "Lucky Jack."

Folktale Jack is also a likely influence on the characters of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The Hobbits were Tolkien's stand-ins for the English middle-class (Shippey 2000, 9), and as we have seen, Jack is the English everyman who becomes a hero. Bilbo's recruitment as a reluctant burglar, which starts his adventures in *The Hobbit*, seems to come from "The Master Thief," commonly told as a Jack Tale in English (e.g. Davis 1992, 119). In his notes on *The Hobbit*, Douglas Anderson (Tolkien 2002, 73-83) points out that the scene in which Bilbo, with his magical helper Gandalf, tricks three trolls into staying out until sunrise, turning them to stone, is reminiscent of the Grimms' "The Brave Little Tailor." This is quite true, but it's also true that

that tale was known in English as a Jack Tale (e.g. Harmon 2001). Meanwhile the trolls' names, "Bert, William and Tom," evoke Jack's brothers Tom and Will. "Old Weatherbeard," another Jack Tale, contains the very Tolkienian image of a magical ring placed among the embers of a fireplace. We know that Tolkien knew these tales; in the essay "On Fairy Stories," he discussed the importance of Andrew Lang's series of colored Fairy Books, in particular *The Red Fairy Book*, which influenced him profoundly as a child (Tolkien 1966, 39-41). *The Red Fairy Book* contains "Jack and the Beanstalk," "The Master Thief," and "Old Weatherbeard," while its predecessor, *The Blue Fairy Book*, contains "Jack the Giant-Killer."

Serious writers of fantasy continue to be inspired by Jack Tales. In her latest work of fiction, *The Tarot of Perfection*, Rachel Pollack (2008) includes several tales that recall Jack's exploits. "The Fool, the Stick, and the Princess" is based upon the Tarot Fool, but also on the idea of the foolish youngest brother in folktales, a category that often includes Jack. Its title, and to some extent its plot, recall "The Ox, the Table and the Stick," a common Jack Tale. One of the book's central stories is "Simon Wisdom," which begins with a young single man named Jack, who eventually marries and has a child named Simon. In his initial innocence, and his kindheartedness, Jack Wisdom is much like folktale Jack. The fact that he makes significant mistakes does not make him any less a Jack; by the end, he has redeemed himself, accepted a magical gift, and helped to save his son.

Pollack's novel, *Godmother Night*, which won the 1997 World Fantasy Award, is based on several Fairy Tales, most notably "Godfather Death." But Jack's exploits also seem to be part of the mix. The central character of the novel is Jacqueline, who tries several versions of her name, including "Jack," before settling on "Jaqe." Jaqe's very special relationship with Death recalls Jack's interactions with Death in the Jack Tale "Soldier Jack" (Chase 1943: 172-179): like Jack, Jaqe tries to prevent those around her from dying, and like Jack she eventually must surrender to

Death herself.

There are several superficial similarities between *Godmother Night* and an earlier Jack novel, Charles de Lint's *Jack the Giant Killer*: both feature a posse of supernatural bikers, and the protagonists of both are named Jacqueline and Kate. In *Jack the Giant-Killer*, however, Jacky is explicitly recognized as Jack of the fairy tales. In fact, in de Lint's realms of Faerie, "Jack" is not a name but a title; Jacky Rowan's name is considered "a lucky name," but not a prerequisite for her being "a Jack." In the story, which occurs in the Faerie realm that exists alongside modern-day Ottawa, Jacky Rowan and Kate Hazel (a.k.a. Kate Crackernuts, another folktale reference) must protect the Faerie clan of Kinrowan



against the Unseelie Court. But Jacky and Kate live in the mundane world, and must learn the ropes of Faerie as they go. Jacky behaves as a true Jack: she obtains magical gifts which she either uses for herself, or returns to their rightful owners; she rescues the Laird of Kinrowan's daughter, whose protection spells are desperately needed by the clan; and, most tellingly, she kills several giants. In the end, Jacky takes up residence in a magical tower as the clan's protector and provider. *Jack the Giant-Killer*, and its sequel, *Drink Down the Moon*, remain the most thorough fictional exploration of Jack's

mythic nature.

Jack is a prominent character in two recent series of fantasy novels for children: *The Sisters Grimm* by Michael Buckley, and *Beyond the Spiderwick Chronicles* by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black. In the former, fairy-tale characters known as "everafters" live in exile in a town in upstate New York, watched over by Relda Grimm and her granddaughters, Sabrina and Daphne. In the series' first novel, Jack, once a rich and famous giant-killer, now works at a big-and-tall men's store. Bitter and angry about his reversal of fortune, he seems ready to help the girls when giants attack the town. As it turns out, however, the giants' attacks are part of Jack's plan to regain his status as a hero. *Beyond the Spiderwick Chronicles* contains a more modest and down-to-earth version of Jack, known as "NoSeeum Jack" because his eyesight is failing. In this series, it's revealed that Jack's giant-slaying is a hereditary role passed from father to son.

Jack has several times been adapted for the screen. *Jack the Giant Killer*, a 1962 stop-motion epic from the team that created *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad*, adds structure to Jack's giant-killing exploits by creating a framing story about a princess captured and bewitched by the evil lord Pendragon. By contrast, *Jack and the Beanstalk: The Real Story*, a 2001 TV miniseries, begins with Jack's modern descendant, and works its way backward to explain Jack's original tale, with effects by Jim Henson's Creature Shop. Both are available on DVD. There is also currently a big-budget film of *Jack the Giant Killer* in pre-production, with X-Men director Bryan Singer directing.

Which brings us up to date, and back to Bill Willingham's *Fables*. *Jack of Fables* is an ongoing series, and strange things are afoot. After insulting the artist who draws him, Jack is beginning to get fat and ugly. Meanwhile, his son, Jack Frost, takes over his role as a hero. Can the series remain as clever as Jack himself? Only time will tell.

These current explorations of Jack-ness notwithstanding, the best way to experience Jack Tales is to listen to traditional storytellers; indeed, this is

the only way to understand what these tales are like in their natural state. The discography lists several commercial recordings that are currently available. Also, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. has many hours of Jack Tales by both traditional and revivalist storytellers, from the 1920s to today (Harvey 2003). So get yourself a CD, close your eyes, and listen to a teller like Ray Hicks (or watch him in the film *Fixin' to Tell About Jack*). A good storyteller can make you identify with Jack too. As Hicks's nephew, Frank Proffitt, once said (McCarthy 1994, 33), "he becomes Jack when he's telling. And when I watch him, we both become Jack."

Stephen D. Winick is a folklorist, writer, editor, teacher, and singer, working at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. He studied medieval literature at Columbia University, and then earned M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania. His academic publications include articles on ballads, proverbs, and modern legends, as well as on Chaucer, Sir Gawain, and Robin Hood. Steve is a veteran music writer, especially for *Dirty Linen*, the magazine of Folk and World Music. He also writes about folklore, myth, and Tarot cards in publications that have included *Philadelphia Weekly*, *National Geographic World*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Tarot World*. Steve has taught folklore at the University of Pennsylvania and George Mason University, has curated five successful exhibits of New Jersey folklife, and has lectured or moderated panels at such wide-ranging venues as the Library of Congress, The Folk Alliance, The New York Eisteddfod, and FaerieCon. As a singer, he performs with Ship's Company Chanteymen, and with Celtic rock ensemble Jennifer Cutting's Ocean Orchestra. He has performed at the Potomac Celtic Festival, the Southern Maryland Celtic Festival, Spoutwood's May Day Faerie Festival, and FaerieCon.

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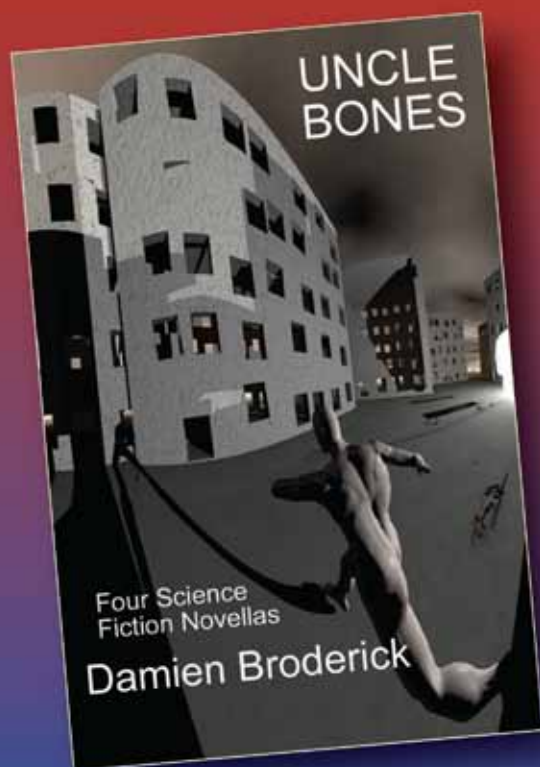
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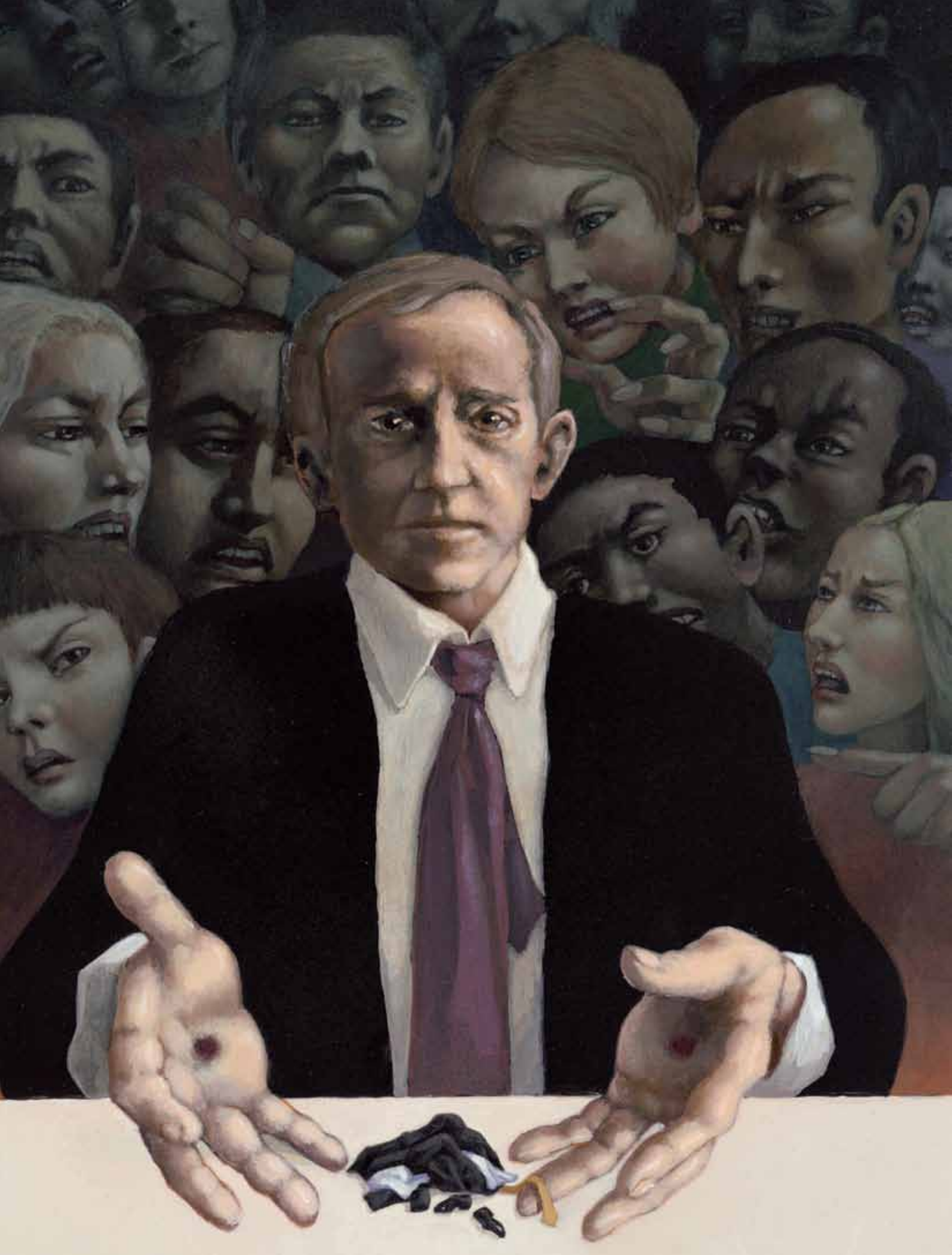
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I can't remember why I wanted to do it, not at the very beginning, when I first got the idea to create this extremely tiny man. I know I *had* a most excellent reason, or at least an excellent *conception*, but I'll be darned if I can now, at this moment, remember what it was. Now, of course, it is much later than that moment of conception.

But it was, as I recall, a very *good* reason. At the time.

When I showed him to everyone else in the lab at Eleanor Roosevelt Tech, they thought it was interesting. "How interesting," some of them said. I thought that was a proper way of looking at it, the way of looking at a tiny man who didn't really *do* anything except stand around looking up in wonder and amusement at all the tall things above and around him.

He was no trouble. Getting clothes tailored for him was not a problem. I went to the couture class. I had made the acquaintance of a young woman, a very nice young woman, named Jennifer Cuffee, we had gone out a few times, nothing very much came of it—I don't think we were suited to each other—but we were casual friends. And I asked her if she would make a few different outfits for the tiny man.

"Well, he's too tall to fit into ready-mades, say, the wardrobe of Barbie's boy friend, Ken. And action figure

clothing would just be too twee. But I think I can whip you up an ensemble or two. It won't be 'bespoke,' but he'll look nice enough. What sort of thing did you have in mind?"

"I think suits," I said. "He probably won't be doing much traveling, or sports activities...yes, why don't we stick to just a couple of suits. Nice shirts, perhaps a tie or two."

And that worked out splendidly. He always looked well-turned-out, fastidious, perky but quite serious in appearance. Not stuffy, like an attorney all puffed up with himself, but with an unassuming gravitas. In fact, my attorney, Charles, said of him, "There is a quotidian elegance about him." Usually, he merely stood around, one hand in his pants pocket, his jacket buttoned, his tie snugly abutting the top of his collar, staring with pleasure at everything around him. Sometimes, when I would carry him out to see more of the world, he would lean forward peering over the top seam of *my* suit jacket pocket, arms folded atop the edge to prevent his slipping sideways, and he would hum in an odd tenor.

He never had a name. I cannot really summon a reason

Copyright © 2010 by The Kilimanjaro Corporation
Harlan Ellison insists he is too famous to need a Bio.
He has decided he would rather be a still-vertical has-been than a young never-was.

I should have understood human nature better. I should have known every such beautiful arcade must have a boiler room in which rats and worms and grubs and darkness rule.

for that. Names seemed a bit too cute for someone that singular and, well, suppose I had called him Charles, like my attorney. Eventually someone would have called him “Charlie” or even “Chuck,” and nicknames are what come to be imploded from names. Nicknames for him would have been insipidly unthinkable. Don’t you think?

He spoke, of course. He was a fully formed tiny man. It took him a few hours after I created him for his speech to become fluent and accomplished. We did it by prolonged exposure (more than two hours) to thesauri, encyclopedia, dictionaries, word histories, and other such references. I pronounced right along with him, when he had a problem. We used books only, nothing on a screen. I don’t think he much cared for all of the electronic substitutes. He remarked once that his favorite phrase was *vade mecum*, and so I tried not to let him be exposed to computers or televisions or any of the hand-held repugnancies. His word, not mine.

He had an excellent memory, particularly for languages. For instance, *vade mecum*, which is a well-known Latin phrase for a handy little reference book one can use on a moment’s notice. It means, literally, “go with me.” Well, he heard and read it and then used it absolutely correctly. So when he said “repugnancies,” he meant nothing milder. (I confess, from time to time, when my mind froze up trying to recall a certain word that had slipped behind the gauze of forgetting, I could tilt my head a trifle, and my pocket-sized little man became *my* “vade mecum.” Function follows form.)

Everywhere we went, the overwhelming impact was, “How interesting, a tiny man.” Well, *ignorantia legis neminem excusat*. I should have understood human nature better. I should have known every such beautiful arcade must have a boiler room in which rats and worms and grubs and darkness rule.

I was asked to come, with the tiny man that I had created, to a sort of Sunday morning intellectual conversational television show. I was reluctant, because he had no affinity for the medium; but I was assured the cameras would be swathed in black cloth and the monitors turned away from him. So, in essence, it was merely another get-together of interesting spirits trying to fathom the ethical structure of the universe. The tiny man had a relishment for such potlatches.

It was a pleasant outing.

Nothing untoward.

We were thanked all around, and we went away, and no one—certainly not I—thought another thing about it.

It took less than twelve hours.

When it comes to human nature, I should have known better. But I didn’t and *ignorantia legis neminem excusat* if there are truly any “laws” to human nature. Rats, worms, grubs, and an inexplicable darkness of the soul. A great philosopher named Isabella, last name not first, once pointed out, “Hell hath no fury like that of the uninvolved,” in less than twelve hours I learned the spike-in-the-heart relevance of that aphorism to me, and to him.

A woman I didn’t know started it. I don’t know why she would do such a thing. It didn’t have anything to do with her. Perhaps she was as meanspirited as everyone but her slavish audience said. Her name was Franco. Something Franco. She was very thin, as if she couldn’t keep down solids. And her hair was a bright yellow. She was not a bad-looking woman as facial standards go, but there was something feral in the lines of her mien, and her smile was the smile of the ferret, her eyes clinkingly cold.

She called him a monstrosity. Other words, some of which I had never heard before: abnormity, perversion of nature, a vile derision of what God had created first, a hideous crime of unnatural science. She said, I was told, “This thing would make Jesus himself vomit!”

Then there were commentators. And news anchors. And hand-held cameras and tripods and long-distance lenses. There were men with uncombed hair and stubble on their faces who found ways to confront us that were heroic. There were awful newspapers one can apparently buy alongside decks of playing cards and various kinds of chewing gum at the check-out in the Rite Aid where I bought him his eyewash.

There was much talk of God and “natural this” and “unnatural that,” most of which seemed very silly to me. But this Franco woman would not stop. She appeared everywhere and said it was clearly an attempt by Godless atheists and some people she called the cultural elite and “limousine liberals” to pervert God’s Will and God’s Way. I was deemed “Dr. Frankenstein” and men with unruly hair and shadowy cheeks found their way into the lab at Eleanor Roosevelt Tech, seeking busbars and galvanic

coils and Van de Graaff generators. But, of course, there were no such things in the lab. Not even the crèche in which I'd created the tiny man.

It grew worse and worse.

In the halls, no one would speak to me. I had to carry him in my inside pocket, out of fear. Even Jennifer Cuffee was frightened and became opposed to me and to him. She demanded I return his clothing. I did so, of a certainty, but I thought it was, as the tiny man put it, "Rather craven for someone who used to be so nice."

There were threats. A great many threats. Some of them curiously misspelled—its, rather than it's—and suchlike. Once, someone threw a cracked glass door off an old phone booth through my window. The tiny man hid, but didn't seem too frightened by this sudden upheaval of a once-kindly world. People who had nothing to do with me or my work or the tiny man, people who were not hurt or affected in any way, became vocal and menacing and so fervid one could see the steam rising off them. If there had been a resemblance between the tiny man and the race of men, all such similarity was gone. He seemed virtually, well, godlike in comparison.

And then I was told he had to go.

"Where?" I said to them.

"We don't care," they answered, and they had narrow mouths.

I resisted. I had created this tiny man, and I was there to protect him. There is such a thing as individual responsibility. It is the nature of grandeur in us. To deny it is to become a beast of the fields. No way. Not I.

And so, with my tiny man—who now mostly wore Kleenex—but who was making excellent progress with Urdu and Quechua, and needlework—we took to the hills. As students at Eleanor Roosevelt put it, we "got in the wind."

I know how to drive, and I have a car. Though there are those who call me geezer and ask if I use two Dixie Cups and a string to call my friends, if my affection for Ginastera and Stravinsky gets in the way of my appreciation of Black Sabbath and Kanye West, I am a man of today. And as with individual responsibility for myself, and my deeds, I take the world on sum identically. I choose and reject. That, I

really and truly believe, is the way a responsible individual acts.

And so, I have a car, I use raw sugar instead of aspartame, my pants do not sag around my shoetops, and I drive a perfectly utilitarian car. The make and year do not matter for this disquisition. The fate of the tiny man does.

We fled, "got in the wind."

But, as Isabella has said, "Hell hath no fury like that of the uninvolved," and everywhere we went, at some small moment my face would be recognized by a bagger in a Wal-Mart, or a counter-serf in a Taco Bell, and the next thing I would know, there would be (at minimum) a jackal-faced blonde girl with a hand-microphone, or some young man with unruly hair and the look of someone who didn't stand close enough to his razor that morning, or even a police officer. I had done nothing, my good friend the tiny man had done nothing, but what they all said to us, in one way or another, was something I think Alan Ladd said to Lee Van Cleef: "Don't let the sun go down on you in this town, boy."

We tried West Virginia. It was an unpleasant place.

Oklahoma. The world there was dry, but the people were wet with sweat at our presence.

Even towns that were dying, Detroit, Cleveland, Las Vegas, none of them would have us, not even for a moment.

And then, all because of this terrible blonde woman Franco, who had nothing better to do with her time or her anger, a warrant was sworn out for us. A Federal warrant. We tried to hide, but both of us had to eat. And neither of us, as clever as he had become, as agile as I had become, were adepts at "being on the dodge." And in a Super 8 motel in Aberdeen, South Dakota, the Feds cornered us.

The tiny man stood complacently on the desk blotter, and we looked honestly at each other. He knew, as I knew. I felt a little like God himself. I had created this tiny man, who had harmed no one, who at prime point should have elicited no more serious a view than, "How interesting: a tiny man."

But I had been ignorant of the laws of human nature, and we both knew it was all my responsibility. The beginning, the term of the adventure, and now, the ending.

And so, with my tiny man—who now mostly wore Kleenex—but who was making excellent progress with Urdu and Quechua, and needlework—we took to the hills. As students at Eleanor Roosevelt put it, we "got in the wind."

THE FIRST ENDING

I held the Aberdeen, South Dakota telephone book in my hands, raised it above my head and, in the moment before I brought it smashing down as ferociously as I could, the tiny man looked up at me, wistful, resolved, and said, "Mother." ∞

THE SECOND ENDING

I stood staring down at him, and could barely see through my tears. He looked up at me with compassion and understanding and said, "Yes, it would always have had to come to this," and then, being god, he destroyed the world, leaving only the two of us, and now, because he is a compassionate deity, he will destroy me, an even tinier man. ∞

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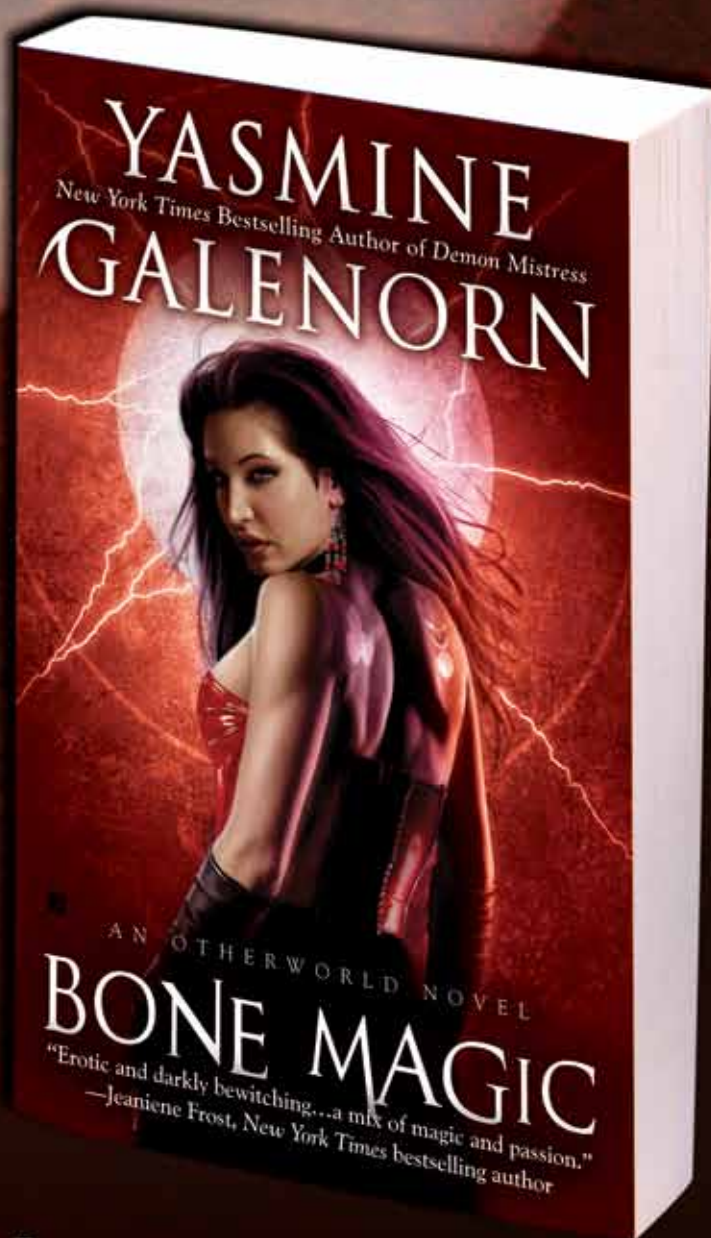
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Mister Oak

by Leah Bobet

Illustrated by Gary Lippincott

Love can fell even the mightiest of us.

—was in love with the girl in the picture window, and when the wind blew he sighed and sighed until the whole back garden drowned in the noise of his wailing leaves.

“She’s just a girl,” gossiped the rosebushes, one among each other. They were ill-kept and rambling, and thus prone to malicious talk. “She’ll die off soon enough.”

“One of my grandfathers loved a woman too,” he told them reprovingly. “He sheltered her and her brother against the end of the world.”

“That tree was an ash,” murmured the yew, who had a lineage of his own.

Mister Oak did not hear, or did not deign to answer. He was in love. He had been in an ecstasy of love for days upon days, since the night the girl in the picture window and her old lover had fought, and there had been much slamming of doors and shouting and cautious creeping of neighbors to windows still darkened. Trees were not prone to loving, and he felt both frightened and strange when she padded out into the yard after the car had driven off, sticky with tears and wiping her nose on her sleeve.

Oh, she had whispered, arms clutched around his trunk, and let out the greatest of sighs. His branches trembled. *Oh*, she’d said again, laying her cheek against his bark, *if only I had a man that was steady as you*.

Her face had scraped his flesh like the first of spring. The claws and scrabbles of backyard squirrels he felt but dully; her breath pierced him to the heartwood. He had the sudden urge to lean a low branch toward her and pat her gently on the hair, but his joints were stiff and his leaves recalcitrant, and the wind whipped them away.

Oh, she said one last time, and let out her own trembling, and went back into the house. The watchful eyes of the neighbors lowered past porcelain-cluttered windowsills, and the owls began to hoot again, *I-see-you*, at the watchers behind their glass. Mister Oak stared after her, at the closed door and then the picture window, when she sadly put out the light, and felt a tingling and a shaking like he had never known before.

“She doesn’t mean it,” he thought giddily, hopelessly, and then gave himself up for loved.

“Tell me,” Mister Oak implored the yew, who grew close to the picture window, in the slow-heat summer mornings. “Tell me what she’s doing.”

“She’s making breakfast,” the yew supplied.

His veins quickened. “And?”

“Yogurt,” he added. “With strawberries.”

“Monster,” hissed the bloodied blackberry bush, and Mister Oak rattled a threat.

“Tell me,” he begged every few hours, until the whole garden grew sick of his loving and sent pigeons to foul his branches. He leaned himself closer, day by day closer to the red-brick house. The summer, the winter, and he’d be able to see himself.

You are what you love, blared the stereo from the picture window one morning where the girl was (the yew claimed) doing her taxes. Mister Oak craned branches to catch the music; trees learned human language from music, back long ago, and Mister Oak’s grandfather had told him there were always fundamental truths to be had from a good ballad.

“I am,” realized Mister Oak, and looked around the garden. He no longer felt an amity with the other trees and bushes, who had raised him up from a child and whispered with him in the wind when the nights chilled to distraction. He would gladly sacrifice the blackberries. The nasty-minded roses could be clipped and put in her hair. He pictured himself oak-footed, unrooted. He pictured himself a man.

He pictured her a tree.

“What if,” asked Mister Oak to himself, with a fresh and a horrific thrill, “what if she is tied to her body in the manner that the dryads were?”

The yew snorted. The tulips stuck out their long black tongues. But the hazel in the corner, crabbed and twisted, reached out a fruiting branch.

“You are a tree, and she is a girl. And that is the way it must be,” said the hazel in her wise old woman’s voice.

“I knew if she could she might be a tree outside.” Mister Oak could imagine the girl as a tree. A bonsai, he decided: small and fine-branched and tough, tough to the heartwood even with the seeming of pale delicacy. Yes; she had a bonsai soul. Thinking back, he could see the twist of branches in her eyes.

“If she could: metamorphosis is not a simple thing. Butterflies tear from the chrysalis. Robins tear from the egg. You would have to tear her open,” the hazel said, and watched him shudder, knowing this he could not do.

He dreamed of it, slow dreams that move like the rings of trees. He tore her open to a perfect bonsai soul, and there was blood, blood.

The summer moved. Mister Oak leaned and leaned and

languished, his roots creaking in the dirt. The girl in the picture window ate and read and tidied up, and sometimes at night she pressed her hands to the lucky glass and wept light back at the flighty stars. She worked more in the garden: Mister Oak shuddered to feel her footfalls through the ground.

She touched him every time she weeded. He listened to the dandelions shriek under her yanking fists and saw corded wood in the muscles of her arms. Her spine was knobby like braided trunks. He leaned down to brush her back once, and in his green-tinged imagination saw blood.

He could not do it.

He looked at his knotty-oak flesh.

It did not hurt him when the squirrels gnawed at his bark, scraped in his hollows to tuck away their caches and stores. It hurt when branches came down in the late summer thunderstorms: a snap, and the nothingness ached for weeks until his flesh scabbed over new. But it passed. It always passed. Nothing had ever hurt him like her cheek upon his skin.

He brushed the length of his own round trunk every day, and pulled back. He was afraid.

"You will have to do it soon," he whispered, worrying at the sky with his leaves. "Soon, soon, or she will forget you."

"Talking on the phone," the yew reported in the brassy heat of August; Mister Oak no longer had to ask. "She's crying again," he said.

"Because no one loves her but a fathead tree," whispered the roses. Their hearts were no longer in it. A blind rabbit had stumbled into their thicket that morning, and all their joy was in its torment. There was a thunderstorm coming. The air was ripe with rain, and they had only a little time for it before it drowned.

Mister Oak leaned toward the picture window. If he were a man he could step inside, stop her tears. He could touch her face like the first of spring. He put a sharp branch to his belly, and it still prickled. The birds rolled their eyes in their nests.

The soil was damp. It drank in the air and grew soft, blossoming to welcome the rain. The problem, Mister Oak realized, was that he was a coward. An ancestor of his had sheltered a man and a woman from a storm like this, long, long ago. But he was not brave outside his solid flesh. The hazel had only told him because he was not brave like a robin or a butterfly.

The rabbit screamed in the thicket. He did not hear it.

Perhaps not, thought Mister Oak. Perhaps she was a girl and he was a tree.

The ground rumbled through his roots, and he lifted his head. Thunder. But no: the telltale pop of her old lover's engine as it

creaked and listed up the driveway and whistled to a halt.

"Oh no," said Mister Oak, "oh no," and the storm came pounding in.

Mister Oak flung himself down, tearing at the ground, and crashed skitter-scatter through the branches of his fellows, crashed skitter-scatter against the roof of the picture-window house where lived the girl he loved.

The shingles bruised his cheeks. The rain poured down, down, and there was a horrible cracking, balance tilting and disappearing, and his roots pulled free of the ground with a roar like the end of the world.

The wind howled. The rain washed his root-feet cold. He shuddered, he laughed, and lay down to wait for the men with the axes and saws.

It would be pleasant to say that when the workmen left the next week with oak-dust on their trousers, Mister Oak pushed

birthing from the stacked ruins of his steady, tall body. Close your eyes and see him struggling, caught root-turned-foot in the smell of new hardwood, branch-arms reaching from the sixty-ringed stump that perched like a grave in the yard, his spirit too strong, too strong for death. He was a young tree. Only young trees fall in love.

In the year Mister Oak was born, his plans might have worked: in those days when a tree fell that was strong and true-hearted, if impulsive sometimes, it was taken gently by the hand and led indoors to be a cabinet, and perhaps children might have

adventures between its thin back and strong doors. The girl in the picture window would have hung her fine dresses in him, packed away against the damp, and caressed his handles gently when the doors were opened and shut.

So picture him thus: picture Mister Oak strong and shining, with skin brown as polished cordwood and eyes of summer green. Hear the rustle of his newborn hands, rough with callus, pushing aside her evening dresses; the *ssshhh* of the hinge, too well-oiled for creaking. The sure tread of man's legs, without stumble or falter. You are what you love, Mister Oak knows. He would be a perfect man. He would never need to learn to walk.

So hear him. Hear his cry of delight, soft and windblown, as he circles the waist of his lady with her dryad-soul like a bonsai, small and fine and tough, and in no way imagine that that rustle is a weeping, the weeping of rain falling, of roofs falling, the weeping of broken-branched trees at the smell of a summer burn. ❧

*The wind howled.
The rain washed
his root-feet cold.
He shuddered, he
laughed, and lay down
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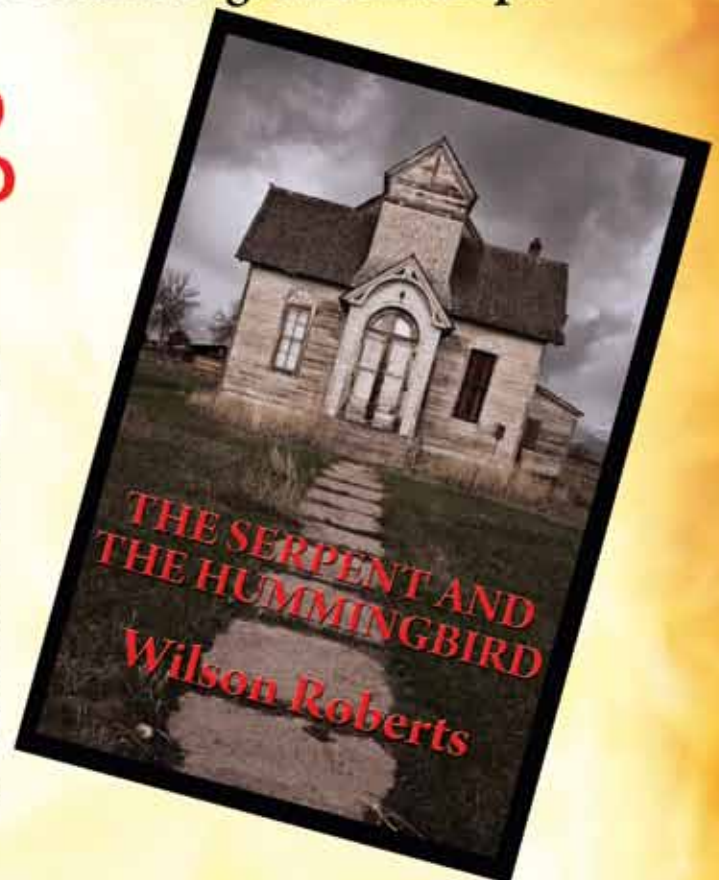
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The Demon of Hochgarten

by Euan Harvey

Illustrated by Dave Leri

In the ancient battle of good versus evil, the boundaries
have never been as clear cut as we would like to think.

As soon as Stefan Von Stawy's heel touched the slick paving of the courtyard, all the dogs in the castle howled at the same time. Stefan kept his face impassive, as befitted a Knight of the Bloody Spear, but inside he grinned.

They know, he thought. You can't hide anything from us dogs.

The stableboy ran up to him and took the reins of his palfrey. Stefan looked around the courtyard. Hochgarten in the winter was as grim as he had heard.

Outside the castle, the birch trees stood bare. The ground was frozen solid, but the snows which might soften it had not settled. Inside, ice rimed the stone and the wind whistled round Stefan's legs, making his long habit flap.

A door banged, and a tall cadaverous-looking man strode across the bailey toward Stefan. The wind whipped the man's thinning white hair around his head. He wore unrelieved black, and a sword hung from his waist.

"You are the Knight?" the man said when he drew closer. His voice was wound tight. Close to snapping, if Stefan was any judge.

"I am Stefan Von Stawy, yes." Stefan stressed the Von in his name. Strictly speaking, he no longer had the right to call himself Von Stawy. Knights of the Order of the Bloody Spear supposedly gave up all family ties when they took their vows. But Stefan's name opened doors for him—and he wasn't about to discard such a useful tool.

"Von Stawy?" The man's eyebrows climbed fractionally. "Good. Very good." He jerked out a bow. "I am Gerhard Brunner, the Baron's chamberlain. It is good to see the Emperor appreciates our position here."

"Your position?"

"Surely you understand? We cannot have commoners sniffing around the Baron, like..." the man waved one hand in a tight circle "...like wolves sniffing around the sheep. It would not do."

"I fear you misunderstand why His Imperial Majesty sent

me," Stefan said. "If the Baron's wife—if the *Imperial Steward's wife*—had died from a fall or of a surfeit of eels, then I would not be here."

"But you must understand—"

Stefan cut the chamberlain off. "The purpose of my Order is not to find and punish murderers. It is to seek out corruption and witchcraft. And when we have found it..." Stefan snapped a fist closed. "We destroy it. Wherever it is, and whatever mask it wears. Do you understand?"

"The Baron will not be happy with this."

Stefan said nothing.

"Come," Gerhard said after an awkward pause. "Let me give you something warming. Some spiced wine?"

"My vows forbid it," Stefan said. "Where is the Baron?"

"He has not yet arrived from Court, my lord."

"We will not wait for him," Stefan said. "Show me the room."

As the splintered door to the Baroness Von Liffen's room swung fully open, a thick stench of blood rolled out.

The beast inside Stefan stirred. The smell of blood always aroused it, and the Baroness's room smelled like an abattoir. Heat built in Stefan's bones.

Blood had soaked into the sheets covering the immense bed in the center of the room, staining them a dark brown. It spattered the tapestries hanging on the walls, adding a note of horror to scenes of hunting and courtly love. It speckled the polished table and high-backed wooden chairs. It had sprayed over the portraits of the Von Liffens that hung on the far wall, the blue of the daughter's eyes changed to purple where the blood ran over the canvas. Above the daughter, one of her mother's eyes was a bright green, the other red, as if someone had plucked it from its socket.

Stefan stepped into the room. Mixed underneath the smell of old blood were the smells of a woman's room: over-sweet perfumes, the slight acidity of sweat, the musky smell of her sex. Threading through these like a poisonous serpent was the

smell of Corruption, black and foul.

Sorcery.

Stefan looked down at the floor, but saw nothing. He looked up at the ceiling. Again, nothing. He turned to face Gerhard, who stood in the doorway.

"Who was the first in the room?" Stefan asked.

"I was, my lord." Gerhard looked around. He shivered.

"Tell me what happened."

Gerhard pinched his nose. "Could we speak outside, my lord?"

Stefan motioned Gerhard out of the room, then followed. They walked down the corridor a few paces.

"Well?" Stefan asked.

"It happened after Vespers. I saw my lady the Baroness leaving the library. It was her habit to spend the afternoons there. My lady did not appear in the chapel for Vespers, but my lady's attendance was sometimes...erratic, so I thought nothing of it. But two hours later, one of the servants, Ilse, came to tell me she had heard the Baroness shouting in her room. I hurried here and knocked on the door.

"I could hear the Baroness shouting inside the room, but I couldn't make out the words. I knocked hard, but she did not hear me. I tried to open the door, but she'd bolted it from the inside. There was...a smell, too."

"What?" Stefan asked.

Gerhard frowned. "Like hot metal. The smell you get when a pot has boiled dry."

Stefan grimaced. If even Gerhard, a normal man, could smell the demon, then it must have been very powerful. This was not good. He waved a hand. "Go on."

"And then..." Gerhard swallowed. "And then, the Baroness began screaming." He looked down at his hands. "I tried to break in the door, but I couldn't."

"Do not think badly of yourself," Stefan said. "You could not have helped her."

"What?"

"I need to see the rooms above and below this."

"But what do you—"

"Now."

When they tried the door of the room above the Baroness's, it was locked. Gerhard rattled the handle with a puzzled expression on his face. "That's odd," he said. "This is one of the guest chambers. Why would they have locked it?" He began trying keys from the large iron ring that hung from his belt.

"You won't find the key," Stefan said, trying to gauge the door's thickness.

"What? Why?"

"Because whoever did this wouldn't want anyone coming in here." Stefan reached deep inside himself and opened the door to the beast's cage. "I'm sorry about the door—but console yourself that it would have happened anyway. You will not find that key."

"What?"

The beast in Stefan roared. Heat flooded into his bones. His body burned. Black fur rippled out from his skin like grass springing up after rain. The muscles in his arm thickened and

swelled. Blood flooded into his mouth as his teeth became long and sharp.

Gerhard gasped. The smell of his fear burned rank and acrid in Stefan's nostrils.

Snarling, Stefan pulled his arm back. Putting all his Changed strength into the blow, his fist hammered into the door just above the lock. Splinters stabbed into his flesh, but the pain only served to enrage the beast further.

Stefan pounded the door with three driving blows, each smashing home with incredible force. On the third, the lock shattered with a loud crack. The door swung open.

Inside Stefan, the beast slavered. The smell of fear from Gerhard crazed it. It wanted to kill.

But the long, hard years of his novitiate in the witch-haunted East had given Stefan mastery over himself. He pushed the beast down and locked it away. The fur shrank back into his skin. His muscles twinged. Joints popped. He became a man once more.

When the Change finished, he turned to one side and spat on the stone floor. He wiped his mouth, tasting blood, then picked out the splinters from where they'd driven into his hand. Some of the splinters of wood were inches long, and dripped blood when Stefan withdrew them. He gritted his teeth—but already the flow of blood was slowing, and the cuts knitting themselves closed.

Stefan glanced inside the room, then turned to Gerhard, who watched him the way a mouse watches a serpent. Stefan pointed into the room.

"That's why you could not have aided her," he said. "You see it?"

Gerhard threw a quick glance in the room, as if unwilling to look away from Stefan. But when he saw the pentacle, he stared.

Stefan stepped into the room. The pentacle was easily large enough to permit the passage of one of the greater demons. Pale lines traced out in crushed human bone described a complete circle twenty feet across, nearly the width of the whole room. Intricate sigils lined the edge of the circle. They hurt Stefan's eyes, but drew his gaze all the same. Whoever drew this was powerful, he thought. And foolish, too. The greater demons were not to be taken lightly. They were old and cunning and malicious beyond understanding. Any slip by the warlock—the faintest lapse of concentration—and the demon would drag him screaming down to Satan.

"What...what is this?" Gerhard's voice trembled. "Witchcraft?"

"Aye. Sorcery," Stefan said. "This is a ward. Nothing living nor dead may pass through it. The lines from the ward extend up to Heaven and down to the Inferno. The unclean spirit will manifest either above or below the ward." Bending over, but very carefully not treading on the lines of the pentacle, Stefan peered at the signs. Halfway round the circle, he turned to Gerhard and pointed at one of them. "Here, this is the descending dragon. It shows that this gate opens downward. The demon would have manifested directly below this room."

Gerhard took a step forward, over the outer line of the pentacle, his boot heel smudging the inner line.

"Stop!" Stefan snapped. "No further. Lift your foot carefully and step backward, out of the circle."

Gerhard's face paled. He stepped back.

"Do not touch the circle," Stefan said. "It is a thing of sorcery, and perhaps still dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Aye. During the summoning, anything that touches the ward will burn. Some of that power may linger."

Gerhard looked at the pentacle, then crossed himself.

Stefan stood and brushed his hands on his habit. "I want to speak to the daughter."

Elena Von Liffen, a thin, pale girl of sixteen, was in the library. Her fine hair—very pale blonde—hung in a single braid down her back. She had classically beautiful features: green eyes, high cheekbones, a delicate nose, and rose-bud lips. But her cheeks were puffy, and she had shadows under her eyes.

"I am greatly sorry to intrude on your grief, my lady," Stefan said. "But I must ask you some questions."

Elena sniffed, then nodded. Stefan leaned back in his chair and let his gaze travel over the walls of the library. The eyes were the windows of the soul, people said, and the beast within him sometimes stole up to those windows to look out on the world. It would not be wise to frighten the girl by letting her see the wolf inside him. Not yet, at least.

"When was the last time you saw your mother?" Stefan asked.

"I hadn't seen her all day." Elena twisted her hands together. "If I'd known, I would have..." Her voice dissolved into a rush of tears. Her shoulders shook.

Stefan did not look at her. He examined the books—hundreds of books, the Baron Von Liffen was very rich—in the cases on the far side of the room. Finally her tears subsided into sniffles, then ceased altogether.

"Tell me about your mother," Stefan said. "What was she like?"

"She was kind and beautiful and I loved her."

"Was there anyone who might have wished your mother harm?"

Elena shut her mouth abruptly. She shook her head. "No. No one."

"I am a man of the Church. Lying to me is a sin. Tell me who it was."

Elena shook her head.

Stefan turned to look at her and allowed the beast to come into his eyes. Elena looked at him as if hypnotized. He knew what she'd be seeing: the beast's eyes—gold and black, with the ferocity of the wild glaring from them.

"Tell me," he said.

She stared for a moment more, then broke gazes and shook her head again.

Strong-willed, Stefan thought. He leaned back and steepled his fingers. "I admire your loyalty. But you are foolish if you hope to deceive me."

Elena glanced at him from the corners of her green eyes.

"Someone threatened your mother. You heard them."

Elena's cheek twitched.

Stefan took a guess. "What did your father say?"

Elena jumped as if struck. "He didn't..." She glared at him resentfully, her green eyes dark and stormy.

A sorcerer sold his soul for power, but he could then sell the power for gold.

"You cannot lie to me," Stefan said gently. "Do not think badly of yourself. Now tell me, what did he say?"

Elena drew a deep breath. "He didn't mean anything by it. Sometimes, he says things when he is angry, but he doesn't mean them." She looked at him, pleading in her eyes. "You must believe me."

"Tell me."

"It was just after we came back from Nuremberg. Two weeks ago today. Papa had been drinking in the coach. He and Mama started arguing, and it got worse and worse. During dinner, Papa went very red in the face and threw a goblet at Mama. Then she said he was a drunken old fool." Elena looked down at her hands. When she continued, her voice was barely above a whisper. "And then she said she hoped he would die soon. And Papa said it was Mama who would die. The next day Papa left for the Taern, and he hasn't come back yet."

After Elena left the library, Stefan walked over to the window and looked out. Below him, the inner bailey of the castle lay in deep shadow.

Questions circled in his mind, questions upon questions, very few with answers. If the Baron killed his wife, why go to the lengths of drawing a pentacle and summoning a demon? Why not simply poison? A knife in the dark? Demons were extremely dangerous, both to the body and the soul. One slip of the tongue and the demon would snap up the warlock like a wolf gulping down a mouse.

Sorcery like that was for the black-hearted, the truly steeped in evil. Stefan had met the Baron Von Liffen twice at court. Without a doubt, the man drank too much and had a temper.

But a warlock? The Baron Von Liffen was a gross man, corpulent and fleshy, greedy, conniving, and possessed of a courtier's idea of the truth. But these were common sins. Sorcery involved the sacrifice of the warlock's immortal soul—and Stefan could not see the Baron doing that. Besides, the Baron was not in the castle. Whoever made that pentacle was in the castle the night the Baroness died.

So. Suppose the Baron had only instigated the murder? Perhaps he had made contact with a warlock, or a Tartar shaman from the shadowed east. A sorcerer sold his soul for power, but he could then sell the power for gold.

But why sorcery? The question kept circling at him, and Stefan had no answer.

The next day, Stefan rose early after a night spent in prayer and meditation. He still had no answers. The truth of what had happened was here; he just had to dig to find it.

Ilse was in the kitchens when Stefan found her. She sat close by the open fire on a low wooden stool, stretching out her hands to the warmth. Wrinkles crossed and recrossed her face, spiderwebbing her parchment-like skin. Her hair, bound up in

a bun behind her head, was white and wispy, with a few errant strands waving in the air.

As Stefan approached, she turned and looked at him. One eye was filmy and white; the other was a very pale blue, and as sharp as a well-honed knife.

"So it's the wolf," she said. Her voice was high-pitched and wavery, but it carried the memory of power with it.

One of the cooks turned from where he was kneading dough. "Grandmama! You can't say that!" He hustled forward, wiping his hands on a cloth. He bowed to Stefan. "I'm sorry, my lord. She's very old, and forgets her place."

"I may be old, but you're a fool." Ilse fixed the cook with her good eye.

The cook raised a finger. "Now then, Grandmama, you see here—"

"Don't you raise your finger to me, Hans," Ilse snapped. "He's a wolf, and that's all there is to it. Now go back to your dough, you great lump."

Hans turned to Stefan. "I must beg your pardon, my lord—"

Stefan held up a hand. "Speaking the truth is no sin."

Relief flooded into Hans's face. He bowed, glared at Ilse, then turned back to his dough.

Ilse looked up at Stefan, her good eye bright and birdlike.

"Herre Gerhard told me that you were the one to hear the Baroness shouting," Stefan said as he pulled up a stool and sat next to the old woman. Even sitting, he towered over her, but she seemed unimpressed by his bulk.

"Oh, yes, I was," Ilse said. "I heard her saying her prayers, and then she started shouting. It wasn't right, so I went for the Herre."

"What was she saying?"

"I don't know. It didn't make any sense. I heard her call for her mother, but the old Baroness has been dead and buried for years."

"And then?"

Ilse fixed him with a pale eye. "And then the Herre tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. Why ask me this? You think the Herre and I killed her? Don't be stupid, wolf."

Stefan smiled. "Tell me about the Baron."

"His lordship? A fine man, a good man. He's looked after me and mine when he didn't have to. He loved his wife, you know. But of course, she was a harlot."

Stefan blinked. "What?"

"A harlot. A scarlet woman. There was her and her fancy boy in the library whenever his lordship the Baron, God bless him, left the castle for five minutes. She thought no one knew, but you can't keep a secret like that."

"She was laying with another man?"

The old woman cackled. "She was doing more than just laying with him! But you wouldn't know about that, would you, wolf?"

"I have taken a vow of chastity, yes," Stefan said equably. "As have all of my Order. Who was the man?"

Ilse tapped the side of her nose. "Well now, that would be telling, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would," Stefan said. "Who was he?"

"It's that young captain, that Lief. But he was only humoring her ladyship. He had his eye on something else."

"What?"

"Do you prefer mutton or lamb, wolf? Eh?"

"Elena." Stefan leaned back. "And what did she think of him?"

"She doesn't like him, not one bit she doesn't."

"I see." Stefan fell silent for a moment, then asked, "Who knew of this?"

"All the servants. Lords and ladies don't really notice people like us, but we know everything that happens. And when her ladyship just happens to spend the afternoon in the library with the young, handsome captain, well, then people will wonder what they were doing. And if she comes out with her hair mussed and her dress on skewed, then they're not going to wonder for very long."

"Did the Baron know?"

"What do you think, wolf? Did he?"

"He suspected."

Ilse shook her head. "His lordship is nearly seventy years old, God preserve him. Her ladyship was to be thirty-four next week. A woman like that needs attention, she needs to have her womanly needs met. Do you understand, wolf? Do you? Eh?"

Stefan nodded. "Go on."

"Well, if even you know it, don't you think his lordship would know it? He's not a stupid man, you know."

"No." On the contrary, Stefan thought, the Baron Von Liffen was shrewd, smart, and cunning. One didn't rise as high at court as he had without being a good judge of people.

"So the Baron knew?" he asked.

"Of course he knew!" Ilse snapped. "He didn't know who, that's sure enough, but he knew what she was doing."

"And he made no effort to find out who?"

"He loved her. Don't you understand? I mean he really loved her. He knew she was laying with another man, but as long as it was secret knowledge, not out in the open for all to see, well, then he could pretend to himself that he didn't know. Do you see, wolf?"

Stefan frowned. "Did the Baron and his wife ever argue?"

"Argue?" Ilse snorted. "An argument takes two. When her temper got up, she used to shout at his lordship—you could hear it all through the castle."

"And what did the Baron do?"

Ilse shrugged. "If other people were watching, he'd tell her to be quiet. But if they were in their chambers, I'd never hear a peep from him. I think he must have just taken it." Ilse shook her head. "I can't understand it."

Stefan couldn't understand it either. Not that a man might behave differently toward his wife than he did in public—he could well understand that. Baron Von Liffen was a feared man in the court. Powerful, and with a choleric temper. But masks and armor were common at court. People assumed roles easily, and stepped out of them just as easily when they left.

That wasn't what was troubling him. The thought that nagged at him was what Elena had told him in the library.

Either Elena or Ilse was lying, but who, and why?

As Stefan crossed the bailey toward the smithy, the wind caught at his habit and swirled it around his legs. A stableboy hurried past Stefan, rubbing his hands together.

In the smithy, though, the heat of the forge drove out the creeping cold. The smith stood over the coals, holding a bar of iron in a pair of tongs. Beside him stood the man Stefan had come to see. Captain Lief was tall, of a height with Stefan, who towered over most men. He had the cheerless features of the north: pale blond hair, pale white skin, and pale blue eyes, as if the ice from the frozen wastes had leached into his blood and flesh.

Neither the smith nor Lief looked up as Stefan entered. The smith held up the glowing bar of metal and turned it this way and that. Stefan crossed his arms and waited. Lief and the smith conferred in low voices. Stefan said nothing.

"I am busy," Lief said without looking at Stefan. "Go and pray."

Stefan remained silent.

"Are you deaf? I said go and pray."

Stefan looked at the smith. The man's gaze flickered toward Stefan from under his bushy eyebrows. "Leave us," Stefan said calmly. He did not raise his voice, but it nonetheless filled the smithy.

The smith put down the tongs, but Lief grabbed his arm. "We are not finished, Herman. Do not leave."

The smith yanked his arm free angrily. "He's a Knight of the Bloody Spear, you fool. I'm not tangling with such as him." He turned and strode from the smithy.

Lief stared into the heat of the forge. Stefan waited until the smith was out of earshot then stepped forward.

"Tell me when it began," he said.

"Satan take you, wolf," Lief spat.

"This is foolishness." Stefan held up a hand and examined it by the hot glow of the forge. "I am a Knight of the Order of the Bloody Spear, which means I speak with the Emperor's voice. Do you understand what that means?"

"I understand that you are a beast." Lief turned to face Stefan. The coals in the forge threw red and orange light over one side of his face. "Do you deny it, *wolf*?" He spat out the last word with venom.

Fur rippled down Stefan's arm. The muscles in the arm writhed, moving under the skin like snakes. Bones shifted. Stefan's fingers thickened; black claws sprang out.

Stefan stared at his arm for a moment before looking at Lief. When he spoke, his voice was thick and clotted. "I do not deny it. And you would do well to remember that."

Lief clenched his fists, then exhaled slowly. His arms dropped to his sides. "What do you want?"

Stefan shook his arm, and as quick as that, the fur retracted and the claws vanished. Stefan tucked his arms in the sleeves of his habit, and looked at the coals in the forge. "Tell me when it

began."

Lief picked up the smith's tongs and jabbed fiercely at the coals. "Do you know the story of Potifah, wolf?"

"Of course."

Lief stabbed at the coals with the tongs. Sparks whirled up from the forge. "She would not leave me be. I told her no a dozen times at least. She would not listen."

"And then?"

"She came to me and said if I did not take her, she would tell her husband I had tried to rape her. The Baron would have had me killed. He doted on her. If she had demanded my head..." Lief shrugged.

"I see." Stefan paused for a moment. "Tell me about Elena."

The hard lines of Lief's face softened. Then he glanced at Stefan, and his face hardened once more. "What of her?"

"You are in love with her."

"No."

Stefan smiled. "You are lying."

"You are a fool."

"This is perhaps true. But you are still lying."

Lief yanked the tongs from the fire. He pointed the glowing ends at Stefan. "I will not have you question her!"

Stefan looked down at the red-hot ends of the tongs, sizzling inches from his face. "I have no more questions for you." He turned and walked from the forge.

Stefan looked down at the red-hot ends of the tongs, sizzling inches from his face. "I have no more questions for you." He turned and walked from the forge.

By late afternoon, the Baron had still not returned. Stefan made his way to the chapel, there to pray and think before Compline. Prayer was Stefan's anchor to the world of men, a link to the Lord that was his

only hope of keeping the beast from swallowing him whole.

And besides, the quiet let him think.

The chapel was deserted. Pale afternoon light filtered in through a dusty window, the glass leaded with a skillfully executed representation of Abraham and Isaac. The colors pooled on the chapel floor, glowing deep and rich even with the weak light.

Stefan knelt to pray. As he ran through the familiar rituals, the words soothed him as they always did, the cadence stilling the rage of the beast. He ran through the events of the day in his mind, fitting what he knew together, trying to form a pattern that would explain all he had found, and asking God for insight to see what he could not alone.

Nothing came to him. Time inched past; the candles slowly shrank, and the shadows gathered as the winter light faded, the patches of color creeping slowly across the floor.

And then, moments before the sun set behind the jagged peaks of the High Taern, the very last of the cold afternoon light shone through the window, catching the top of the leaded image and making it glow with life. The old patriarch held his knife high; on the makeshift altar, his son strained against his bonds. The weak winter light illuminated Abraham's face, but left that

of his son in shadow. Abraham's eyes burned a deep azure.

And with a flash of understanding, Stefan realized who had killed the Baroness Von Liffen.

He climbed to his feet, turned to face the chapel doors. But before he could move, the doors burst open, and Gerhard staggered into the chapel. Gerhard looked dazed, with the same expression Stefan had seen on men after a battle. Stefan's nose twitched. The chamberlain smelled of blood.

"What has happened?" Stefan snapped.

"The Baron..." Gerhard swallowed. He looked weaker, shrunken almost.

Stefan looked down at Gerhard's hands. They dripped red. Blood covered the man's shoes, and he had left a line of bloody footsteps along the corridor leading to the chapel.

Reaching forward, Stefan gripped Gerhard's arm hard. "What has happened, Herre Brunner?"

"I... You must come." Gerhard turned and walked unsteadily down the corridor. Stefan followed.

Gerhard pushed open the door that led into the Baron's room. Blood was everywhere—spattered over the walls in thick ropy streaks, dripping down the bed posts, soaking into the tapestries.

In the center of the room, staring wide-eyed and gape-mouthed at Stefan, was the head of the Baron Von Liffen.

"Why did you not inform me?" Stefan glared at Gerhard. His anger pushed at him. The beast growled and snarled inside.

"I was coming!" Gerhard cried. "In God's name, I swear! I left him only for a moment, and when I returned...this!"

The muscles in Stefan's arms bunched. His fury was building: anger at both himself and Gerhard. "Where is Elena?" he growled.

"The library," Gerhard gasped. "But..."

Stefan pushed past the chamberlain. He needed to find Elena. Now—before the worst happened. When he reached the library, he yanked open the door.

Elena and Lief stood by the fire, hands clasped. The captain's head was bent low, as if to kiss the girl. But at Stefan's entrance, Lief whirled. He glared at Stefan, and sudden anger boiled off him like steam. Trembling with suppressed rage, he glared at Stefan. "Stay away from my betrothed, beast!"

Elena simpered at him, then circled his arm with her hands and looked at Stefan through the veil of her hair. For a moment, Stefan saw an expression there that did not belong. It was a sly, mocking look, and horribly *knowing* for a sixteen-year-old girl. It was only there for a moment, then fear flooded once more into Elena's face, and she lowered her head.

Stefan stared hard at her. At her eyes.

Her *green* eyes.

It was the portrait that was the key. The portrait of the Von Liffens that hung in the Baroness's room. The portrait of Elena and her mother, where Elena's eyes were blue and her mother's were green.

Stefan saw it now. She was a good actor, but she could not disguise her eyes, the windows to her soul. They remained hard and old, chips of green stone in her pale face.

The Baron's wife had cried for her mother just before the

demon appeared. It made no sense for a grown woman to call for her mother, but a child? A sixteen-year-old girl suddenly wrenched from her own body?

"Your own daughter?" Stefan clenched his fists.

A mocking smile flashed across Elena's face, then looked up at Lief. "The wolf frightens me, beloved!"

Lief drew a dagger and pointed it at Stefan. "I warn you, stay back!"

"She is not who you think she is." Stefan did not take his eyes off Elena.

"Gerhard," Lief called. "Get some men up here, now!"

Stefan took a step forward. "Don't be a fool, Lief." The dagger glinted in the light. Stefan recognized silver. His eyes narrowed. "I command you to step aside."

"You command nothing here," Lief snapped. He stepped between Elena and Stefan.

"She is not who you think she is."

"You are crazed, wolf." Lief did not take his eyes from Stefan. Elena took two steps toward the door. Stefan angled to cut her off, but Lief stepped in between Stefan and the girl.

"You fool!" Stefan shouted. "She is the Baroness, or whatever creature lived in the Baroness's body! Do you think she will let you live? When she tires of you—and she will—what will she do then?" Stefan took a step forward. Heat built in his bones. His teeth felt loose in their sockets.

"Stay back!" Lief crouched, ready to strike with the silver dagger.

"Kill him, beloved!" Elena cried.

Fur rippled out of Stefan's skin. A musky scent filled the air as the beast swam to the surface. "Remember what I am," Stefan said, his voice a thick gurgle. "And stand aside." Then Stefan's teeth lengthened into fangs and his mouth filled with blood and he could speak no more.

Elena whirled and ran for the door. Stefan knew where she was going—the pentagram in the room above the Baroness's. If she got there, she'd use the pentagram to summon the demon. Only this time, Stefan knew, Elena would be on the inside, and the demon would appear on the outside. The castle of Hochgarten would cease to exist—and with it Stefan and all who knew the truth of the evil thing that now wore Elena von Liffen as a mask.

The fire of the Change swept over him. He bent over with the pain of it. It burned through him, melting and reforming his flesh like wax in a flame. Joints cracked, ligaments popped and stretched, muscles sheeted out over his back and arms. His face lengthened into a muzzle and claws sprang from his hands.

Then it was over and he straightened up. The blood drained from Lief's face, but he still blocked the door. The silver knife still pointed at Stefan.

Fool, Stefan thought, and launched himself forward. Lief slashed out, and Stefan felt a line of fire on his arm. Then Stefan's shoulder slammed into Lief, sending him flying through the air.

Before Lief had even crashed into the floor, Stefan leaped through the doorway. He hurled himself forward along the corridor, bounding sometimes on two legs and sometimes on four.

He bowled over servants, sending them crashing to the floor. Gerhard stepped from a door in front of him, and Stefan hurled him aside. There was no time to stop.

He raced up the steps to the room with the pentagram. Halfway up the steps, the smell hit him—scorched metal. The air grew thick and began to curdle. Black things scuttled in the corners of his field of vision. Something buzzed shrilly in one ear.

Elena had already started the summoning. Stefan had only moments left.

He burst into the room with the pentacle, smashing aside the door with the shattered lock. Elena stood in the pentacle, both arms raised. She chanted in a harsh language, sharp-edged syllables which clustered in the too-dark corners of the room.

Something chuckled behind Stefan, a dark sound of malice and willful evil. Stefan whirled round. The corridor behind him was pitch-black—but Stefan felt the eyes of something huge looking at him from the darkness. Its hate beat against his face with a sick heat.

It was here; the gate was open. And Elena stood inside the pentacle. Stefan could not reach her. Nothing could pass through that circle. Anything that touched it would burn.

Stefan glared at the heat-shimmer in the air. The lines of force carved a cylinder from the Inferno up to Heaven. Stefan roared in anger and frustration. He had lost. And now everyone in Schloss Hochgarten would pay the price.

Something slithered in the corridor behind him. Triumph shone from Elena's face. She laughed.

Stefan let go of the chains that held the beast in place. Fury boiled through him, filling his veins with fire. He roared, then hurled himself forward at the circle.

When he crashed into the ward, agony exploded from his flesh. Fire crackled and the smell of burned meat was suddenly heavy in the air.

Stefan shook his head, then rushed at the ward again, his arms outstretched to grab and rend Elena. Again, the lines of shimmering force threw him back, his flesh smoldering and fur burned. But all the pain did was enrage the beast still further, crazing it with the lust for blood. It could smell Elena, and the primal urge to kill and feed drove the wolf mad.

The demon behind him lurched forward, and cold fire flared in Stefan's back as it reached for him.

Stefan howled and blood flew from his mouth in a fine spray. Elena stared at him, chanting still, but now with fear in her green eyes.

Again, Stefan launched himself forward, all control gone and the man inside him lost to the overwhelming rage of the beast.

But this time, when he crashed into the ward, Elena stepped back—and her foot touched the human bone where Gerhard had scuffed it. Elena shrieked in sudden pain and smoke started from her heel.

Darkness pressed down on the room, very thick and heavy. It crushed Stefan, suffocating him in blackness and night. Then something cracked and a wind howled past Stefan and into the room.

Elena shrieked again, but this time not from pain. The wind grew in strength, and the air inside the pentagram darkened.

Fighting the beast, wrestling with his own demon, Stefan stepped back. The wind swelled into a gale, rushing into the pentacle.

The light inside the pentacle dimmed ever further, sucked from the air. Elena screamed once more, then all the light vanished, leaving only a blackness that looked roiled and swirled within the walls of the pentagram.

Stefan felt cold eyes staring at him hungrily. Then the darkness popped and vanished and the interior of the pentagram was filled only with the steaming entrails, blood, and flesh of Elena's dismembered body.

Stefan swung himself up onto the back of his horse, then

turned to look at Gerhard, who stood in the gateway, Schloss Hochgarten's bailey framed behind him by the thick stone walls of the gatehouse. The wind gusted cold past Stefan, and Gerhard hunched his shoulders against the frigid blast. Despite the cloak he wore, Gerhard's face looked pinched and thin.

"But, what do I do?" Gerhard asked again, his voice plaintive.

"Wait," Stefan replied. "The Emperor will send instructions. Hochgarten is his, now."

"But... I—"


"God be with you," Stefan said. He clicked his tongue and touched his heels to the flanks of his horse, which turned away from the grim bulk of Hochgarten, toward the road leading down the valley, whose sides were covered with leafless birches, their black branches looking like claws. The snow lay thick, great white drifts piled deep round the silver trunks of the birches, concealing anything that lay beneath.

Not a hundred yards from the gate of Schloss Hochgarten, Stefan caught a glimpse of movement among the birches. The wind blew toward him, and his horse whickered softly. Stefan sniffed, then reined in his mount and waited.

The wolves padded softly from the birches and across the mountain road, long lean shapes of gray, silent as smoke drifting over the snow. The pack leader stopped at the side of the road, sniffed, then pawed at the snow. Stefan sat motionless, watching. The scent led to nothing, and the pack leader gave up after a few moments, trotting into the gloom of the birches once more. The rest of the wolves followed, silent and wild.

If there was anything buried in the snow, the wolves would find it: the frozen body of a deer, starved by winter and slain by a snowstorm; the stiff and rigid body of a sheep or goat, strayed from the pen and smothered by snow; the frost-blackened body of a man, a farmer caught in the open on a bad night.

Wolves always found death; it drew them.

Stefan wished the pack luck. He waited until he was sure the wolves were deep into the forest, then kicked his horse into a brisk trot, heading back to Nuremberg and the Imperial Court. 



Mélanie

by Aliette de Bodard

Illustrated by Frank Wu

Can you exchange the magic of the mind for the magic of the heart? Would it be a fair trade?

March in Paris: the trees in the school's courtyard have bloomed in the mild weather, tumblers of white and pink flowers hanging just out of reach.

The boarders sit in small clutches under the arcades of building B, their notebooks open on their knees—making their last, frantic revisions before the competitive exams.

"Three weeks left," Richard says, tapping his pen against a mathematical formula.

"Yeah," Erwan says. He's staring at the other students—all shining, all gorged with light: the light of numbers and curves, the endless dance of the formulas that rule the world. And, as it always does, his gaze fastens on Mélanie.

She's standing behind her boyfriend Bertrand, both arms dangling down his shoulders. Alone of all students, she doesn't shine—or so little it's barely visible. Even the math and physics she's had to cram during her revisions haven't sunk in, haven't made a difference.

She'll be here next year, Erwan thinks, his heart sinking. There's not an engineering school that will open its doors to her, not an entry exam that she'll pass—not with so few numbers, so few equations trapped within her. It's as if the math had washed right over her, forgotten as soon as she'd read them.

"Penny for your thoughts," Richard says, and then he looks toward Mélanie. "Oh, I see. Daydreaming again."

"I'm not," Erwan protests, blushing. "I was thinking—about the exams."

"Everybody is," Richard says. "But some of us are going to have an easier time than others."

Erwan's gaze leaves Mélanie, to stare at her boyfriend.

Bertrand.

He's sitting cross-legged on the ground, a book by his side—a thriller, not even a math or physics book. Numbers whirl beneath his white skin—numbers and equations, endlessly broken up, endlessly merging, a sight that makes Erwan's eyes ache. With the exams so close, Bertrand's whole being looks transfigured. No wonder he's always first, always effortless. The math is in his veins and in his bones.

"Yeah," Erwan says. "Bertrand will pass with flying colors.

He always has." He can't quite keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Richard stares at him, thoughtful. "Jealous? I didn't think it was that bad." Light gleams on the metal frame of his glasses, briefly turning them into a line of small, almost invisible digits. "It won't last, you know."

"What won't last?"

Richard shakes his head. For someone who's failed once at his exams, he's disturbingly serene—as if the whole thing didn't concern him at all. "I've seen it before. The exams will drive those two apart. And if it doesn't happen...well, once they're both in different schools—" He opens his hands wide, letting the wind blow through them.

"They could be in the same school," Erwan says, unsure of why he's defending Bertrand now.

"They might," Richard says. "But let's face it: he'll get a far better school than she will. Mathwise, she's not in his league at all."

Erwan watches Mélanie, the delicate, almost porcelain-like cast of her skin, her green eyes shining in the hollows of her face—and he's filled with an absurd sense of loss, as if they're all standing on the edge of a chasm that only he can see. "No," he says. "She's not in the same league at all."

The classroom is almost unrecognizable: the chairs and tables pushed against the wall, with a crowd at the center dancing to the drums and guitar chords blaring from the loudspeaker. Washed in the throbbing neon lights, the students appear ordinary—almost hollow, the math's radiance drained away.

Erwan leans against a wall, letting the vast music fill the emptiness in his chest. Richard, his face creased in a mocking smile, is flirting with a black-haired girl—his normal boisterousness exacerbated, either by drink or by the proximity of the exams.

Saturday, Erwan thinks. The last Saturday. The entry exam for the Mines, one of the oldest engineering schools, starts on Wednesday. And then another, and another, until everyone is drained: all the numbers whirling in their heads disgorged on

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pieces of papers, their magic given away to strangers.

His hand strokes his christening medal, the only magic he'll have left by the end of it: silver from his home town in Brittany. He wraps his fingers around it until it cuts into his flesh, trying not to think of the smell of the sea or the feel of brine in his hair. He came here for a bright future; came here to the alien, narrow streets of Paris—and found himself utterly lost, the math his only unchanging anchor.

Near him, so close he could touch her, Mélanie is dancing, her face changing color with each beam of light. Her body sways and twists like a length of ivy; her wrists bend at near-impossible angles with smooth, effortless gestures; her hands close and open, holding out in their empty palms a treasure without price. She's fierce and beautiful and feral; freedom made flesh, far, far from exams and math and schools. Erwan's heart constricts in his chest just watching her; some part of him wishes that he could join her dance and forget everything.

Then, as if the world somehow had shifted, it's not abandon he sees in her eyes anymore, but the tightness of repressed pain. Her teeth are bared in a rictus; her eyes shine moist under the neons.

He's moving forward, almost without being aware of it, moving until he stands before her. "Mélanie? Are you all right?"

"I—" She stares at him, her eyes widening, changing from green to yellow to green again—and in their depths, for a split second, he sees a light beating like a living heart. He starts opening his mouth, but everything is forgotten when she shakes her head with a grimace of pain. "I need to leave. Now."

"I'll see you to your room—" Erwan begins, but she's mouthing *No*.

"I'll be fine," she says.

"Mélanie—" But before he can gather his thoughts, she's gone, striding from the room. He catches a glimpse of her retreating back: she holds herself straight, rigid, but he can see the trembling in the set of her shoulders. Almost, he starts after her—almost, but a voice stops him.

"What did she tell you?" a voice calls.

Erwan turns, slowly. Bertrand is staring at him, his fists clenched, every line of his face drawn with sick, sick fear. Among all the students, he alone still shines, the radiance within him so strongly anchored even the party lights cannot wash it away. Numbers coalesce within his eyes, throb beneath his skin. "What did she tell you?"

"She didn't feel well," Erwan says. He can feel the fear coiled in Bertrand's chest, the fear coiled in the air around them—

drawn into his lungs with the smell of sweat and cigarettes. Why is Bertrand so nervous? The exams? It seems to be...more than that, much more, but he can't imagine why. "She left. For her room, I suppose."

Bertrand reaches out, seizes the lapel of Erwan's shirt. Erwan, stunned, stands paralysed for a moment, the cotton digging into his skin. "Don't talk with her," Bertrand hisses. "Don't you approach her again."

Erwan doesn't move—but a cold, remote part of him takes over, and asks, "Why? She's not yours."

"You don't understand anything. Don't talk to her. Leave her alone." He's almost sobbing now—folding back into himself like a hurt puppy, small and pathetic.

Erwan pulls his body away, leaving Bertrand standing, grasping at empty air. "You're drunk," Erwan says, but deep down he knows that's not the case. Bertrand's voice is slurred, but his breath doesn't stink of alcohol; his face isn't flushed—save with the light of numbers and integrals, the light that's always been there, that always will be. If he's drunk, it's only with fear.

Why?

"Leave her alone," Bertrand repeats, and then he's gone too, running out of the room by the same door Mélanie left. Going after her, no doubt.

Not his business. Not his place to interfere.

Erwan thinks of math and sea and brine, curves entwined with the rising and falling breath of the ocean, numbers woven out of the gulls' screams and the whispers of the wind. They're safe and familiar. They cannot affect him in any way. They cannot hurt him.

There's an insistent knocking on his door, a pounding that echoes the one in his head. "Erwan!"

Richard.

"Go away," Erwan moans, turning toward the wall.

"Come on, you sleepyhead! It's eleven o'clock."

"So what?" Erwan asks. "Let me sleep." But he's wide awake now, his mind sharp. Or at least sharper than it should be.

He rolls over and crawls out of bed, groaning as aching muscles protest, and opens the door. Richard stands grinning on the threshold, proffering a white parcel splayed with the name of the nearby bakery.

"Éclairs," he says, still smiling. His skin glows white and blue and red—all the numbers aligned underneath, rewriting themselves until they reach a final result—and then everything

starting back again, an endless cycle. None of that belongs to someone who barely slept last night: probably less than Erwan, since he left later. Not for the first time, Erwan wonders what Richard's secret is. Nothing, he guesses, but habit. Two years of preparatory classes have hardened Richard, built a shell around him Erwan isn't sure he can actually pierce.

They sit on the bed and eat the éclairs—the taste of coffee paste and pâté à choux filling their mouths like an explosion.

"You're sitting on something," Erwan says, "and you're dying to tell me."

Richard grins. "How *did* you know?" he asks.

Energy, Erwan thinks. Numbers and curves. Richard is glowing, equations crackling in the air with every one of his gestures—he's moved out of his normal patterns.

Except Richard won't see it, of course. As far as Erwan knows, he is the only one in the class who can make out such things: his Druid ancestors all had the Second Sight, and it's surfaced again in Erwan—as a twisted shadow of what it should have been.

"It's the talk of the class," Richard says. He finishes his éclair, rubs his hands together, and carefully folds the parcel paper into a neat, flat square with its two diagonals. "Bertrand and Mélanie broke up."

Erwan remembers hands gripping his shirt-lapels; remembers the slurred, angry, fearful voice. "How—? Why—?"

Richard shrugs. "He followed her last night to her room. She was upset by something and didn't want to let him in, so he just kicked open the door—lifted it clean off its hinges. Totally pissed, if you want my opinion."

"He wasn't drunk," Erwan says. Richard's gaze swivels toward him. Erwan goes on, quickly, "I saw him yesterday. He wasn't drunk—he was freaking out."

"Exam stress?" Richard lifts an eyebrow. "Ah well, it happens to the best of us."

Erwan shakes his head. "Bertrand never has to worry about that. He's always first. Why would he freak out?"

"Sometimes," Richard says, "people look like they're succeeding without working, but in reality they're not."

Erwan shakes his head. "I did homework with him once." He still remembers that, in his dreams: three of them around a table, two still trying to understand the ramifications of the question, and Bertrand, awash with a feverish radiance, aligning equation after equation on his paper; Bertrand flourishing his results after a few minutes, and explaining to them. Mélanie was there, he remembers: unobtrusive, sitting in a corner of the room, reading a book—not a math book, but some fantasy book with a dragon rearing on the cover. She'd smiled when Bertrand spoke—a proud, protective smile, more like a mother than a girlfriend. "He really has math in his blood," Erwan says.

"Instability?" Richard asks. "The best mathematicians were mad."

"I don't know. I suppose he's taking the breakup badly," Erwan says, thinking of Bertrand's sick, jealous fear.

Richard shrugs. "He looks a bit under the weather—not as sharp as he once was, if you get my drift. But he'll pull through. He always has."

Some part of Erwan is wishing Bertrand wouldn't make it, that he'd pay some price for what he's done—kicking open the door, no doubt screaming, frightening Mélanie out of her wits. No wonder she broke up with him. "Yeah, I suppose he'll pull through," he says, at last. "What did you want to revise today?"

Richard laughs. "Four days before the exams? Trust my experience, Erwan: you don't revise now. You stop working and get some fresh air. Come on, let's go walk through the Mouffetard market."

Exam after exam after exam: Math following physics following chemistry following computer science... Every night, some of the light within them drains away; some of the magic gone forever, seeping within the ink, absorbed by the paper.

In his room, Erwan has pinned physics and math formulas on the walls; he sees them every morning as he rises, every evening

as he goes to bed. It's a reminder, a pact: he will not think of home, nor of the silver medal on his chest, only of the light; of numbers and curves and matrices.

One night, he's about to enter his room when he catches a glimpse of a girl, quickly retreating down the corridor—a silhouette he'd recognise anywhere. Mélanie.

Once before, he let her go; he won't be such a fool as to do it twice. Before he can articulate the thought properly, he's running after her in the corridors, past the slanted doors of students' rooms, past the small, narrow windows that open onto the courtyard. Down the darkened stairs leading to the school restaurant; running under the arcades of the courtyard, until she turns right into the small plaza with the infirmary—and, rounding the corner, out of breath, Erwan sees her sitting on a bench, her back to him.

He stops, hesitantly, not knowing what to do. He hasn't seen her since the party; nor has he seen Bertrand—they're not at the same exam center, and not in the same wing of the dormitory. There are rumors that Bertrand's doing badly at the exams; that his hands keep shaking and his face contorting into grimaces at odd times; that the breakup with Mélanie has shattered him beyond repair. Erwan's not sure what to make of them; and, to be honest, he doesn't want to think about Bertrand, especially not now.

"You can come," Mélanie says, without turning. "It's all right."

His heart beating faster and faster, he rounds the bench, and sits beside her. She doesn't shine at all—no equations under her porcelain skin, no numbers whirling in her pupils. It will be a wonder if she places high enough to be accepted into a school.

"How's it going?" he asks, unsure of where to begin.

She smiles—a tight, sad smile. "As well as it can, I suppose. You?"

Erwan shrugs. "Okay, I guess." He's not Bertrand: he won't

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whiz through. He doesn't have the math singing in his veins, in his bones. "We'll see."

"Yeah." She stares at the building in front of them, her gaze distant. "I miss home," she says, finally. "I wish I were there now, and not stuck at school."

Erwan's fingers close around his medal; he feels the coolness on his skin. He thinks of home; of the small cottage on the cliffs and the smell of the sea every morning; of the wind singing in his ears as he cycles to town; and a wave of nostalgia rises within his chest until every breath burns. He wants to go back, back to a place where he belongs. "I miss home too," he says.

She nods, sagely. "You're from Brittany, right?"

"Yes," he replies. "Ever been there?" he asks.

She shakes her head. "No. I'd never been out of Lusignan before I came here—and that wasn't the greatest idea I ever had."

"Why?" he asks.

Her gaze, for a moment, is troubled. "I wanted to—get away," she says. "In my family, we've been the same, generation after generation—never venturing beyond the nearest village, never setting a foot out of Poitou. I thought I could be different. But I can't. It's too hard."

"You're here," Erwan offers.

"Yes." Mélanie's voice is bitter. "But I'm no different."

"You are," Erwan says, instinctively—and when her head snaps toward him, her gaze intent, he wonders why he said it at all. "I mean, you went away. You're sitting for the exams. You're going to be an engineer. That counts for something, surely?"

Mélanie doesn't speak for a while. "I don't think I want to be an engineer, Erwan."

"Then..." The word is on his lips before he can think.

"I don't know what I want to be. I just don't."

"You don't have to know now," Erwan says.

"I'm going to have to. It's that, or one more year. And I can't survive one more year."

Erwan, at a loss once more, falls back on platitudes. "Richard says it's easier the second year."

"Richard's Richard. Nothing ever fazes him, does it?"

"Sometimes. But not often." He smiles, says, "You're going to be all right. I'm sure you will."

"I wish I could be as sure as you," Mélanie says. Her eyes, though, are not as grave as they were. "Thanks."

Erwan shrugs, trying to appear nonchalant—he's never been good at that, and she probably sees straight through him. But if she does, he doesn't see it in her eyes.

They sit side by side for a while. In Erwan's mind, the math has surfaced again: curves rising like waves from the sea. Magic: the only one he knows anymore. Mélanie just sits there, staring at the old buildings of the school, staring at the cloudless sky above them, her skin pale and shadowed, her green eyes unwavering—her eyes...

Erwan wakes up, as if from a dream. Something is wrong, subtly wrong with her eyes.

She's not blinking. Or, at any rate, not often enough to keep her eyes moist. And there's something in the depths of her pupils—some alien, pulsing light buried deep within her.

Mélanie's gaze focuses on him, mildly curious. Her eyes are

green, the color of the sleepy sea, and she's blinking normally. Normal. Everything is normal. It's just that it's late; and he's exhausted and he's imagining things.

Imagining things.

But, that night, as he lies in his bed with the numbers whirling in his head, staring at the curves arcing across the ceiling, he remembers: he's seen this light, once before. He's seen it shining in her eyes at the party, except that he's forgotten.

Forgotten—or been made to forget?

Why would she hide it?

She has to, part of him whispers in his mind. Because it's not the light of science and not the radiance of numbers, and it's not ruled by anything.

He wonders whether Bertrand saw it. He wonders what the real reason for the breakup was.

He doesn't speak of it to Richard—he can imagine, all too well, his friend smiling at him in a bright, skeptical way. And maybe the small part of him that whispers that he's imagined it is right; maybe he's making a fuss over nothing.

What he wants, in any case, is to be near Mélanie—to sit by her side, the math and the exams forgotten; to sit close to her, telling stories of home, listening to her voice with its lilting accents; to hear tales of Lusignan and its castle perched on the cliff.

"The castle belongs to your family?" he asks.

She laughs, a crystalline cascade. "No, you silly. The castle's only ruins now. It's just for tourists." Her face turns melancholy again—she's as changing as the sea itself. "Though my ancestors did live inside it, at one point."

"So what happened?" Erwan asks. "They got thrown out with the Revolution?"

Mélanie shrugs. "Bad things happen," she said. "We lost the Count's trust. But that was long, long before the Revolution ever came to Lusignan."

Erwan can sense she doesn't want to talk about it: part of the family's shame, he guesses. Every family has its own dark, deeply buried secrets. "What do you have on Monday?" he asks. As soon as he's said the words, he curses himself for a fool. He wanted to change the subject, but all he managed to do was shift it to something which makes Mélanie uncomfortable.

She shrugs. "Math." She doesn't seem particularly concerned. But it doesn't seem to be an act, either—unlike Richard, who affects indifference but who revised his courses as fiercely as Erwan, who has numbers whirling within his mind, numbers coalescing on his hands and on his lower arms.

"You're giving up?" Erwan asks.

"I don't know. I thought—I thought I'd found it, you know," she says. "I thought I'd found something that justified everything."

"Someone," Erwan says, slowly. He can guess some of her thoughts; but not all.

Mélanie doesn't speak for a while. Her hands have clenched in her lap, so hard the bones are showing—translucent, brittle bones that seem almost unreal. "He was wonderful at first. And then it went sour." She pauses, shakes her head. "It always does, anyway."

Erwan has no idea what he can say; he fears that every word he can conjure will only break the moment, like a trembling feather that finally tips the balance. When he doesn't speak, Mélanie rises, picking up her schoolbag from the bench. "I have to go," she says.

Erwan's voice finally gets past the obstruction in his throat. "Do you want to go to the cinema?"

Mélanie, already going, half-turns, surprise etched on every line of her face. "That's very sweet of you, but I can't. Not tonight."

"Some other day?" Erwan asks, still not willing to be turned down.

Mélanie hovers, clearly torn—though between which options Erwan cannot fathom. Bertrand's memory is perhaps too strong—perhaps it's too early for him to be so forward. "After the written exams are over," she says, finally. "Friday next week?"

Erwan, surprised, can only nod. Mélanie does a half-turn, swiveling on her feet as if they didn't quite touch the ground, and then she's running toward the exit, carrying herself straight. Too straight.

He's seen that once before—at the party. She holds herself straight because she's in pain again. "Mélanie!" he calls, but she doesn't hear him. He runs after her in the school corridors, trying to stop her, to comfort her.

Her door, when he reaches it, is locked. He knocks, but there's no answer.

"Mélanie?"

"I'll be fine, Erwan," she finally replies. Her voice is—off, somehow?

"You're hurting."

"No," she says, and it's the lash of a whip. "I'll be fine. Please, Erwan. Leave me alone."

He's not Bertrand. He's not going to kick the door open, or to force himself when he's not wanted. "If that's what you want," he says, at last, and turns to go.

He walks back to his room, brooding. The shadows are lengthening in the corridor—the sun of late afternoon, hanging golden over the corridors.

At his door, he hesitates, his hand closing over the handle. He can go inside and stare at the formulas pinned on the walls, at the ceiling until he sees numbers within the scabbed paint, until he hears the breath of the sea in every creak of the parquet. Or he can go see whether Richard's in his room.

The fear of loneliness wins. Erwan walks ten paces and knocks at his friend's door.

Richard is in, listening to some classical music on his stereo system—violins wailing in counterpoint to majestic brass, another curve traced in the vastness of space. "You look wasted," Richard says. His face is glowing, pulsing to the rhythm beneath

the music—the secret voice of the numbers.

"I don't," Erwan says, raising hands to his eyes—and seeing how translucent they have become, how little he holds. All the magic given away, drained away by the paper and the ink. "Do I?"

Richard's voice is his best imitation of a stern mother. "Come on. Let's go for a walk."

They end up in Gibert Joseph, one of the biggest bookshops in the Latin Quarter. Erwan drags Richard upward, into the fiction section—right next to the Springer-Verlag math books and their yellow covers that hide yet more curves, yet more numbers. It's hard to escape math—no, it's impossible.

"Want a book?" Richard asks, holding two thriller paperbacks, one in each hand. He purses his lips, as he always does when he's contemplating a purchase. Finally he walks toward the nearest help-desk, and starts chatting with the salesman, asking him for his opinion on the authors.

Erwan stares at the rows of books, all perfectly, neatly aligned, as if the salesman were also a math-freak. There's power here, crackling between the covers. He feels almost rejuvenated—almost, and yet it goes too deep, the hollow within him.

"Browsing?" a sarcastic voice asks behind him. "Fancy meeting you here."

Erwan slowly turns, and finds Bertrand standing before him. For a moment he's struck speechless: Bertrand's face is white, haggard; he's bent over as if bearing some great weight. And he's—dull. There's no light in him, nothing left at all, no searing radiance made up of thousands of numbers and equations. Dull.

"What happened to you?" They're the first words that come to Erwan's lips.

Bertrand's lips stretch, in what might be a smile. "I warned you, Erwan. I told you to stay away from her."

"I don't see—"

"Don't lie to me," Bertrand growls. "You're seeing her. You're chatting with her, all friendly-like. Next thing I know, you'll be kissing. Want to kiss her, Erwan?" He manages to make the whole prospect sound repulsive.

"She's not yours anymore," Erwan says, warmth flooding his cheeks. "You can't tell me what to do and what *not* to do."

Bertrand laughs—a sickening, joyless thing. "Tell you? I'm warning you. You think you can have her? There are rules, Erwan. Rules." His voice trails off; he looks around the store uncertainly.

"What are you talking about?" Erwan asks. You're drunk, he wants to say, but it's not that, it's never been that. Madness, Richard said. Perhaps it's madness. Perhaps it's in the blood.

But the math was in his blood, and they're not here anymore.

"No Saturdays," Bertrand says. "No outings on Saturdays. They're all the same, in her family."

Today is Saturday. And today, as she was at the party—which

Erwan stares at the rows of books, all perfectly, neatly aligned, as if the salesman were also a math-freak. There's power here, crackling between the covers.

was also on a Saturday—Mélanie won't see him. Mélanie is in pain. "I don't understand what you're talking about," Erwan says.

"I know what you want," Bertrand smiles. "But you're not ready to pay the price. You're not ready."

"You're making no sense."

Abruptly, Bertrand grasps both of Erwan's hands, and holds them in an iron grip. "No sense?" He laughs again. People are stopping, staring at them both—and Richard, still deep in conversation with the bookseller, doesn't realize any of this. "You should stay away from her. You don't know what you're dealing with."

"And you're not helping," Erwan says, caustically.

Bertrand releases Erwan's hands, as abruptly as he took them. He stares at Erwan with bloodshot eyes. His lips work, but there's no sound coming from his mouth, as if something in him doesn't want the words to get out. Finally he spits, "You're so pathetic. Such a useless, blind fool. Have you never wondered about Lusignan?"

Lusignan. Mélanie's birth-town. Lusignan is hauntingly familiar, a name that should mean something, that he's already heard or seen. "Bertrand—"

But Bertrand is already walking away, all hunched and sad, basking in the glow of books whose presence he doesn't seem to feel. He's the one who is small and pathetic. Erwan never liked him, but it's not right either, to see him reduced to such a state.

"What was that?" Richard asks, coming back with only one book in his hands.

"Nothing," Erwan says. But he's thinking of Lusignan. He's thinking of eyes that should have been green and weren't always so. "I need to drop by the Internet café."

Erwan sits in a dingy chair in the basement of the small café, and stares

at the screen for a while. Then he searches "Lusignan," and the first thing that comes up is a page about the history of Poitou. It has a story in it: a medieval myth, the story of Raymondin, a nobleman who found a beautiful woman bathing in the forest and made her his wife. She gave him land and power and respect, all in return for one condition: that he would not seek to see her on Saturdays.

Stories are stories, and they always end the same way: Raymondin, suspecting his wife of infidelity, opened her door on a Saturday evening, and found her bathing—with the yellow-slitted eyes and tail of a snake. His hand went for the hilt of his sword—whereupon his wife screamed a terrible cry, and vanished from the castle, never to return again.

The wife's name was Mélusine.

Mélanie, Erwan thinks, and remembers eyes shifting from green to yellow and back to green. He remembers her words: *my*

ancestors lived inside the castle, but we lost the Count's trust. Lost the trust. No Saturdays.

Mélanie.

Somehow, he makes his way out of the Internet café.

"What was that about?" Richard asks.

"I needed to send an email."

"You're a very bad liar, you know," Richard says conversationally. "I wish you'd tell me what this is all about. Mélanie?"

"Perhaps." Erwan doesn't say anything else, and neither does Richard.

Only when they're at Erwan's door does Richard speak up. "It's none of my business. But be careful, whatever you do."

Erwan shrugs, as carelessly as he can manage. "I will be. Thanks."

"You really *are* a terrible liar," Richard says, staring at him. But after a while he just shrugs and walks away, as if washing his hands of the whole business.

Erwan waits until Richard is gone. Then he goes to Mélanie's room, and knocks.

She's standing by the window, not looking at him. She's filled with light now—a light that pulses with the wildness of the forest, a light that can't be closeted within the rhythm of numbers.

There's no answer. He stands, staring at the locked door. The last time he was here, he told himself that he was no Bertrand; he told himself that he wouldn't force himself where he wasn't wanted. It's not enough now, it's not enough. He has to know.

"Mélanie?" he asks, and when still there is no answer, he hurls himself at the door, again and again, until the hinges give way and the door—already broken down once and shoddily repaired—finally opens.

She's standing by the window, not looking at him. She's filled with light now—a light that pulses with the wildness of the forest, a light that can't be closeted within the rhythm of numbers. "Mélanie," he says, and she turns, with a swift, fluid movement that doesn't belong to

anything human.

Her eyes open, stare at him. They're yellow and impossibly round, and her skin is flaking away, revealing scales underneath. *Run, run,* whispers a crazed voice within him. But he can't; he's transfixed by her gaze.

"Rules," he whispers. "No Saturdays. You didn't tell me that."

"You saw Bertrand." Her face is unreadable—it's changed so much.

"Yes," he says. And, because he's read the myth, he asks, "What did you give him?"

She laughs—the same bitter, weary laugh as Bertrand. "What he wanted. What he only truly ever wanted."

"The math."

"The math in his blood and in his bones, enough talent to make him first. To make him shine."

“And he left.”

Her eyes blink—a slow, ponderous movement, but surely snakes can’t blink? Surely snakes have no eyelids?

She’s not a snake. She’s not human. She’s—other. “He left,” she says at last, and her voice is Mélanie’s again, small and sad. “He saw me and screamed, and left.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t tell you the rules because I thought—” She’s blinking furiously now, as if to dislodge something stuck on her eyes. “I thought it wouldn’t come to that point. I thought you wouldn’t need them.”

“I don’t want rules,” Erwan says. His eyes are still trying to encompass what she is—to fit her within the curves and formulas and neat equations of the world. But he can’t. She’s not part of that. She’s never been part of that. “I want—” he stops, helpless, drowned in her light. “I—”

He has no words. Nothing left but math, and, at the last, they betray him—equations scattering into nothingness, arcing curves broken, numbers turning into alien letters.

“You don’t know what you want?” Her voice is mocking—the snake’s hiss, before it strikes. “Everyone does. Bertrand did.”

“You don’t,” he says, the words torn out of him, out of the remote part of him that still watches, that still ponders. “You came here, and you still don’t know.”

She shakes her head, angrily. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It should,” Erwan says. He stands, still—because he cannot do anything else. “It should.”

She stares at him for a moment, her yellow eyes lidded. “Go away,” she says.

“No.” It’s the only reply he can make.

“You broke the rules.” Her voice is the hiss of a snake. Lines of light arc from her waist, hardening into the coiled body of a snake. “You will go away, and you will forget.”

“I—”

The light is getting stronger—and the odor of the forest, the odor of rotten leaves and moldy earth, rises in the room until Erwan can smell nothing else.

“You have no will.” Her words tear at him, unmake him, piece by piece—he has no magic left, nothing that would resist that. “You will forget.” And her voice speaks alien words: a low, droning sound that slowly washes over him until the walls of the room blur.

He’s listening to it—feeling the final numbers scatter out of him, the final equations irretrievably wiped away, memories of Mélanie’s true face wavering and fading—knowing he’s losing precious things, that he can’t do anything—losing...

The smell of the forest grows stronger and stronger: shadowy trees hover on the edge of existence.

He has to speak. He has to—there was something he should have said, something that would have changed the course they’re on—

He has to—

“Where—will—you—go?” The words are torn from his mouth, leaving a trail of fire in his throat.

Her face lies in shadow—fading further and further away. “Home. I should never have left. Things are simpler back there.”

Home.

The wave of nostalgia rises in Erwan—home and the crash of the waves, home and the smell of buckwheat crêpes: the core of him, untouched, as solid and as real as his silver christening medal.

He touches it, feels the tingle going up his fingers. “Home,” he says. “Home.” And, as the room swims back into focus, he sees Mélanie with her shimmering scales and her coiled body on the floor. But she’s not great and terrible, she’s not alien: just a girl, bewildered and lost. And reflected in her eyes is a hollow-eyed boy—just a boy, bewildered and lost, too.

“You don’t belong home,” he says, slowly, every word coming with difficulty.

“I belong nowhere.” She stands poised by the window, unmoving. The feeling of great strength is slowly fading.

Erwan shakes his head, slowly, trying to dispel the sense of emptiness now filling him. “That’s not true,” he said.

She shakes her head—angry, bitter. “Of course it is. What other place is there for me?”

He moves, slowly, agonizingly slowly, coming to stand by her at the window. He thinks of Raymondin of Lusignan, groping for his sword in the darkness; of Bertrand, kicking open the door and screaming at what he found there. He thinks of that instant, suspended in time, when the story could have followed another course.

“You’re here,” he says. “And so am I. And I won’t run away.”

And, reaching out with both hands, pulls her toward him, for an awkward kiss.

Her skin is cool, slithering under his fingers—and her lips are cold on his, too, the coldness of deep winter nights. Something—fangs, he thinks, dimly—pierces his skin as they kiss, and numbness travels to his cheeks, his face, his heart.

She pulls back from him—surprised, angry perhaps? He can’t read her gaze. He can’t guess what might lie under the yellow eyes.

“There are rules.”

“Yes,” he says. “You change back on Saturdays. That’s the only rule, isn’t it?”

She holds herself, rigid, says nothing.

“There’s no need for closed doors,” he says, slowly, groping for words that will change everything. “No need for any rules.”

She laughs, spins round—letting him see the coiled snake’s body on the floor, the sense of immense power gathering behind her. “Men are always afraid of what they cannot encompass.”

Erwan spreads his hands wide, with a calm he doesn’t feel. “I’m afraid,” he said. “But I’m still here. I’m still standing where I need to be.”

Her face is unreadable once again. She bends toward him, her lips meeting his—fangs piercing his skin, the same numbing feeling spreading through him.

When she pulls away, she says, “It won’t last. It never does.”

“It will last long enough.” Slowly, carefully, he holds out his hand to her, and she takes it. Power crackles in the air, fills the hollow in his chest.

He’s lost the math; lost the magic of numbers, the radiance of curves.

But there are other kinds of magic. ☞



The Unknown God

by Ann Leckie

Illustrated by Gallegos

You'd imagine an immortal would be better at long-term planning, wouldn't you? On the other hand, why should they care?

Aworo, Lord of Horses, god of the Western plains, walked into the marketplace in Kalub in the third hour of the morning. It was early summer, and at this hour the sun was warm and comfortable. Pens of livestock and slaves, rickety stalls, rows of fish staring blankly, baskets of fruit, orange and red and purple, clay jars of wine and beer surrounded a fountain twenty feet across. The water came from the Nalendar, the river a short walk to the east, the supreme god of the city, the one being Aworo didn't want to meet right now.

Down the street was the gilded roof of the temple of the god Smerdis, who Aworo did want to meet. But he was tired, and hungry and thirsty.

Perched on the lip of the fountain was a wide, shallow bowl and in it sat a large, gray-green frog. "Aworo!" the frog croaked. "You bastard! I thought you'd gone back to the plains! Does the Nalendar know you're here?" Aworo shrugged, and the frog asked, "Where have you been? You look awful, and you smell worse."

"Out in the hills, to the west." He scooped up water and drank from his hands, and then, "with atheists," he confessed.

"Atheists!" The frog gaped. "You?"

"I didn't say I was an atheist. I've just been living with them." He leaned against the stone edge. "Do you know what they believe?"

"All sorts of things," the frog said, "some of them less sane than others. I had one tell me right to my face that I wasn't real."

"These particular atheists," said Aworo, "believe that this world is a fake. A copy of the real one. They say the real one is pure mind, and perfect, incapable of change. Which is how they know the difference."

"Oh," croaked the frog. "And that's why they camp in the hills, eating grass and never bathing?"

"They don't eat grass. They meditate on Truth." Truth was changeless, single, distant from this world. Above the noise and clamor of the market, past it, the roof of the temple of Smerdis shone in the sunlight. When he'd last been in Kalub, a year before, he'd paid no attention to Smerdis's cult.

"Meditate, eh?" asked the frog. "Not the most reliable way to determine the truth, in my experience. How's it been working

for you?"

"I don't know yet." The frog honked derisively. "Look," Aworo said, determined to change the subject. "I want some cash, but I don't want to ask the Nalendar for it."

"I wouldn't either, if I were you," said the frog. "You've got some nerve just setting foot in Kalub. You seduced one of her best fraud investigators!"

Aworo had thought he was master of himself, until he'd met Saest. He'd never felt such an exquisite, breath-catching feeling before. *Marry me*, he'd said to her that night on the river's edge, and why not? He was living a man's life. There was no reason he shouldn't marry.

He was incredulous at her refusal, and then furious. *Can't leave the Nalendar? Have it your way! Turn away from the river and die!* And he'd felt it go out of him, the power that would make his words the truth, and horrified at himself, he'd turned and run, and left Saest to her fate.

Even a year later he didn't want to think about it. He pulled his seal up out of his dirty tunic. "Do you know who'll take a voucher? Without tossing me out the door?"

"Not me," said the frog. "I can't afford to make the river angry at me."

A year ago the frog had made a small but sufficient living fishing lost objects out of wells and ponds in exchange for prayers, but it hadn't had any money.

"You? Got a new line of work?" Aworo asked.

The frog puffed proudly. "Have I! I remove wrinkles and moisturize skin. It's very minor work, really, just a little tweaking of muscles and skin cells. I don't know why more gods aren't doing it, it keeps me in prayers. And sacrifices! I never got many sacrifices before."

"Where does the money come from?"

"I have a boy," said the frog. "He makes up a sort of lotion and sells it. And look here." The frog leaned aside. On the bottom of the bowl were several coins. "People just toss them in now and then! I'm telling you, I should have thought of this years ago. I have an account at the temple of the Nalendar. I'm saving up, going to have a little shrine built if I can get enough together."

Aworo eyed the coins, calculating. "If you've got a tablet, I can seal a draft for the coppers you've got there. I've got enough in my account to cover it."

"I'm sure you do," said the frog, "but like I said, I'm not going to risk angering the Nalendar. Unless you've come to clear up the mess you've made."

"How can I?" Aworo asked, bitter. "Some things can't be undone."

"Well, it's not like she's dead!" exclaimed the frog, and then it croaked in surprise. "Did you think she was dead?"

A strange feeling fluttered in Aworo's stomach. He was afraid to try to name it. "Yes."

"Oho! So now the whole atheist business makes sense. You thought you'd killed her. But she's not dead yet. The Nalendar came and got her and took her to an island in the river. Didn't think of that, did you? But if that's not why you're back, what are you doing here?"

Aworo was suddenly embarrassed. "It's...haven't you ever wondered? If there was...more?" He didn't mention the temple of Smerdis.

"More?" asked the frog. "You mean like the perfect universe of your atheists? Or are you asking about what happens to humans after they die, or gods who tell big enough lies? Easy enough to find out, isn't it? Just make a statement out loud; you'll know soon enough if it's not true!" It chuffed and rumbled a bit, amused at itself.

The witticism was an old one. Aworo ignored it. "Sometimes, out in the hills, meditating, I've felt...something."

"The right sort of head injury will do that," said the frog.

It took Aworo a few moments to organize his thoughts, to be sure he didn't say anything regrettable. "I notice you're not saying straight out that there's no such thing as fate, or a higher power, or an afterlife."

"That's because I'm not an idiot," said the frog. "Whatever my private suspicions, I don't like gambling with those stakes. And neither do you, or you'd have tried it yourself by now. But enough of this. You're scaring customers away. And I'll only help you if it's worth my while." It puffed thoughtfully. "I'm not above currying favor with the river. I'll give you cash in return for your draft if you say, right here and now, that you'll remove the curse you put on Saest."

Aworo blinked. The strange feeling was back. He opened his mouth to say *I don't know if I can*, but his attention was arrested by the sound of his own name.

Slightly around the circumference of the fountain a man in a long green coat held the reins of a nicely groomed, spavined black horse. "Sired by one of the sacred stallions of Aworo, on the plains," he was saying to another man. "But as you can see, these white markings here disqualified him—the stallions of Aworo must be without flaw! Which is how I got him so cheap." That horse had never been sired by one of Aworo's own, he was certain. The other man, examining the horse, nodded sagely, impressed.

Aworo narrowed his eyes, drew a breath to speak.

"Temper!" warned the frog.

"I need to raise the money right away," the green-coated man was saying, "or I'd never part with him, let alone at this price."

The frog was right. Whatever Aworo said would be made true—or Aworo would regret it. Like all gods, he was circumspect from habit, but sometimes... Aworo took another breath. "He's cheating you," he said, loud enough for the green-coated man's customer to hear. "That's not one of Aworo's horses, and it's half lame already."

The green-coated man gave Aworo a dubious look, took in the dirty tunic, the bare feet. "How do you know that, sir?"

"I'm Aworo."

The customer gaped, and the green-coated man laughed. "Of course you are." He caught his prospective buyer's eye and made a gesture towards his forehead. The two men and the horse moved away from the fountain.

"You," Aworo began. A few words would strike the man dead, but Aworo wanted something more satisfying.

"Lord of Horses!" croaked the frog, quietly. "Don't say a word."

"He's *using my name*."

"It's not a good idea to speak without thinking, Aworo!" The frog scabbled at the bottom of its bowl, agitated. "Look here, take the coppers, pay me back later. Get a bath and some clothes and finish your business with Saest!"

A bath and a shave, and a visit to a second-hand clothes stall, made Aworo presentable enough to get a room in a decent guesthouse on the strength of his seal. After rolling it across a clay tablet and agreeing to the charges for room and food and drink, he sat down in the house's common room to a bowl of fish stew and a stack of flat bread, and didn't look up for a full twenty minutes.

When he'd finished he saw that the room was more crowded. The woman who'd brought him his bowl was fetching cups and pitchers, and he stopped her as she passed, her arms full of crockery, and asked her for beer. It came sooner than he expected, and he sat drinking, watching the people around him.

Saest was alive. He had cursed himself for his cowardice and now he was even more disgusted with himself, both for not thinking of the obvious solution that the Nalendar had seen immediately, and for abandoning a woman he loved. He'd spent the last year wondering if what some humans said was true, that something survived after death. If somehow he could tell Saest he was sorry, get her forgiveness. And now he found she was alive after all and he sat here afraid to actually face her, dreading that moment.

"Mind if I join you?" The speaker was a short, stocky man with a neatly trimmed beard and an expensive-looking dark blue coat. Aworo made a gesture of assent, and the man pulled out a stool and sat. "Crowded today!" Aworo agreed that it was. "I'm Nes Imosa." His accent said he was from the northern Nalendar valley.

"I'm Aworo."

Nes Imosa's eyes widened. "Distinguished name! I suppose your parents hoped you'd be good with horses." Aworo opened his mouth to say something noncommittal, but the other man kept talking. "I came down yesterday with a boatload of grain. I love Kalub at this time of year, and there's nothing like the baths! I mean, a man can get a hot bath at home, but there's

something special about the hot springs. Not to mention the pretty serving girls at the bath houses.” He winked.

“You left your wife at home, then?”

Nes Imosa laughed as though Aworo had told a tremendously amusing joke. “Ah! Ha ha! I did. Though the wife likes a soak when she can get it, too. And—” his expression was suddenly earnest. “—I don’t give her reason to complain. Take my advice, and never give your wife reason to complain! It makes it much easier to take the waters at Kalub every now and then.” He winked again. “Married yourself?”

“No.”

“Oh, I know that look,” said Nes Imosa. “She left you?”

“She wouldn’t marry me to begin with.”

Aworo looked around for the serving woman, hoping for more beer.

“Hah! When a woman says no, it wasn’t meant to be, it’s better that way.”

“I’m convinced you’re right,” said Aworo.

“I am, I am! So, what are you here for? You’re not from Kalub, not with that name and that accent.”

Aworo thought of the frog, skeptical by the side of the well. “I’m curious,” he said. “I’ve been hearing a lot about this god, Smerdis...”

“Smerdis!” Nes Imosa said, surprised. “Smerdis. Yes, I’ve heard of him. The One, the Supreme, his followers call him, but I’ve never heard that he’s done much for anyone. Well, there’s Smerdis’s bull—pure white, they say, with gilded horns.”

Aworo had heard of devotees who, laying a hand on the bull as it passed, had been granted inner peace and enlightenment. “There’s a procession...”

“Every month. They’d like to do it more often, of course, but they can’t get the permit. Can’t have gods parading around the city whenever they like, we’d never get anything done!”

Aworo nodded. “Do you know when it is?”

“Tomorrow afternoon, I think. Or you can go into the temple, and for a fee you ask a question and the bull nods or stamps or what have you, for an answer. For a slightly larger fee a priest watches it walk round its ring and then produces a few lines of doggerel.” Nes Imosa shook his head. “Supposedly Smerdis so transcends this corrupt world that only the specially trained can receive his messages, and even then they’re garbled. And what good is that, I ask you?”

“I’ve heard,” Aworo ventured, thinking of the perfect world of the atheists’

teachings, “that the benefits he confers are spiritual rather than physical.”

“Yes, yes, I’ve heard that too, and I don’t say I think much of it. My spirits are always in good shape when my body is too!” He laughed again, very amused at himself. “It’s true that some people seem to have...something wrong. And maybe Smerdis helps them. I couldn’t say. I’d rather deal with a god I can get an answer from, one who’s got a track record.”

“I don’t blame you,” said Aworo. The serving woman set down a pitcher on the table, took the old one away.

“Yes, girl, that’s just what we need,” said Nes Imosa, with good-natured enthusiasm.

The Movies That Make You **SCREAM!**

by R. David Fulcher



The woman was broad-shouldered and tall—a good six inches taller than Nes Imosa. She hadn't been a girl for a few years at least. But she turned and asked, pleasantly enough, "What, sir?"

Nes Imosa grinned up at her. "More beer!"

As the evening progressed, and the serving woman brought more pitchers, Nes Imosa became even more voluble. How he'd learned the rumor and gossip—some of it from across the continent—Aworo wasn't sure; Nes Imosa never seemed to stop talking long enough to learn a new story. But somehow, in the very early hours of the morning, Aworo was struck with a confessional impulse and found Nes Imosa listening intently, if drunkenly, to his intentionally vague tale of having fallen in love last year, been turned down, and left the woman in trouble.

The words *in trouble* had a galvanizing effect on Nes Imosa. "You can't leave a woman in that condition!" He punctuated his exclamation by striking the table with his cup. "Where is she?"

"An island in the..." Before he could finish, Nes Imosa had Aworo by the arm and was pulling him up off his seat. "It's not *that* kind of trouble," Aworo insisted.

"Girl!" cried Nes Imosa, "put it all on my bill!" And next thing Aworo knew they were stumbling down to the river to look for a boat.

The sun was just rising as the boat scraped the shore of the island. "I doubt anyone's awake," said the fisherman they'd paid to row them over.

"No worries," said Nes Imosa, and staggered onto the beach. Birds twittered, and somewhere along the shore a heron made its scratching croak. The fisherman shook his head doubtfully and Aworo climbed out. "Hallooo!" called Nes Imosa. "Aworo's lady!"

Appalled, Aworo listened to the echoes of Nes Imosa's shout die down. Five minutes later Saest came out of the woods, her dark hair down, a large brown shawl wrapped around her. "You!" she said, striding up to where the two men stood. "You're drunk!"

"Best way to do this sort of thing," said Nes Imosa.

"I'm not drunk!" said Aworo, and then staggered and dropped to his knees as the lie hit. A wash of nausea overtook him. "I didn't think I was," he said.

"Lady," said Nes Imosa, with a courtly bow. "I am..."

"I don't care who you are," Saest said. "And you." She turned to Aworo. Her voice had suddenly turned flat. He'd never seen her so angry. "Unless you've come to remove the curse you put on me, you can leave right now."

Aworo looked over his shoulder—carefully, sudden movement was too disquieting. The boat was gone. He looked back to Saest. "I don't know if I can."

Nes Imosa pointed. "You! I know who you are! You're Aworo!"

"I told you I was," said Aworo, irritably. The sun seemed awfully bright for so early. And to Saest: "The boat left."

"Swim!" said Saest, and turned and walked back the way she'd come.

Saest lived in a house with two other priestesses of the Nalendar, who tended a beacon at the end of the island. What Saest did wasn't clear. Perhaps nothing more than tend the garden and feed the chickens, which, Aworo thought, would certainly have contributed to her resentment at being stuck here.

Inside, once the shutters were open, was warm and bright—though not so bright as outside. Food cooked over a low fire at one end of the room. One woman rolled up mats and blankets on the floor, while another took crockery off a shelf. "What exciting work!" said Nes Imosa, digging into a plate of eggs with a chunk of flat bread. "Chasing down swindlers."

"Yes, it was," said Saest, with venom. She sat at the end of the table, still wrapped in the shawl, though her hair was tied up in a blue scarf. A priestess put a plate of eggs in front of Aworo. He waved it away and put his head in his hands.

"Everyone knows who you are now," said Nes Imosa, blithely. "I've always wondered, why doesn't the Nalendar just say something like *everyone who tries to cheat me will die?*"

"Too broad," said the woman who was still holding Aworo's spurned breakfast.

"She could narrow it down."

"No," said Aworo, still looking at the table. It was plain polished wood with a swirling, convoluted grain. "It's too dangerous."

"There are hard ways to do things, and easy ways," said Saest. "The hard ways cost more. If a god makes a general statement, it could easily come true the hardest way possible. And it might have other consequences."

"The more specific you can be, the more control you have," said Aworo, not looking up. "For instance, if I knew what caused hangovers." Saest made a derisive snort. "If I knew how they worked, I might be able to make a statement that would affect a very small thing, something that would ultimately end the hangover. If I were just to say that I didn't have a hangover anymore—imagine all the conditions under which that might be true. Anything could happen." He considered for a moment whether it would be worth the risk. He was revered on the plains, prayers and sacrifices were regular and plentiful, he was powerful. But he remembered the blow of the untruth down by the water, and decided he'd taken enough chances for one day. "The more things that would have to happen to make it true, the more power it would take."

"What causes hangovers?" asked Nes Imosa.

"Drinking too much," said Saest, acerbic. Nes Imosa laughed.

Aworo winced. "I never made it a study. There are other gods for that. I think it's a couple of different things."

"So it's easier," said Nes Imosa, "for the Nalendar to send out investigators pretending to be rich young widows."

"We're not all undercover," said Saest, "but yes."

"I'd be afraid to defraud the Nalendar," announced Nes Imosa. "Much, much too powerful. Besides, the whole temple deposit system makes it so much easier to do business up and down the river. Very convenient. I would hate to do anything to compromise it."

"You'd be amazed what people try," Saest said. "People come in with forged seals every day. Sometimes they're obvious,

Running away from the river that night, he had first been horrified at what he'd done, and the fact that he was running away.

but sometimes they're very well done. Or there'll be a team—one person will deposit money in Kalub and get a seal for the account, and make a copy. Then a confederate will take the copy to another city, and they'll both withdraw most of the money on the same day. It takes the messenger with the day's numbers a while to reach the other temples, and meantime they've gotten away with twice the money they started with."

"Ingenious!" Nes Imosa was clearly impressed. "And you track these people down and catch them in the act."

"I used to." She was bitter again.

"Friend Aworo," said Nes Imosa, his voice scolding. "This won't do. You're just going to have to remove that curse."

"The Nalendar has lots of people working for her," Aworo said. "It's not like Saest was the only one." He couldn't see Saest's reaction, but he could imagine it. "Besides, I have to be careful how I do it."

"You've had a year to think about it," Saest pointed out.

He looked up. The sun shone in the open shutters, making her brown skin glow warmly, and her eyes...his breath caught for a moment, a stomach-turning combination of desire and shame. "I thought you were dead."

"Ridiculous!" said Nes Imosa. "You should have known better."

"Thank you," said Saest. "So what have you been doing for the last year?"

He owed her the unevasive truth, but couldn't bring himself to say.

"Looking for the mythical Higher Power," Nes Imosa said. "The god of gods."

Aworo was struck with horror at how much he'd said, that he thought he had been vague and equivocating, during last night's drunken conversation. "I really did think you were dead," he said. "I wanted...if there was something beyond this world, or someone to forgive me what I'd done..."

"You were looking for justification," Saest said. "When you decided to be human you went all out, didn't you."

Aworo sighed and put his head down on his arms.

\$He woke stiff and sore, still bent over the table. The sun no longer shone in the unshuttered window, the fire at the end of the room was banked, and he was alone. He pushed himself up, creaky and unsteady, and went outside.

One of the priestesses was throwing grain to the chickens. Without speaking, she gestured down the pathway that led to the shore.

A rowboat rested on the beach. A few yards away, Saest was conferring with Nes Imosa. "Drinking too much indeed," Nes Imosa was saying as Aworo walked up. "But it seemed like such a good idea at the time." Saest snorted, and Nes Imosa flinched. "I beg you madam. The light, the noise...I can hardly bear it."

"Saest," said Aworo.

"I don't want to hear it," said Saest, her voice even. "I don't want your apology, I don't want you to tell me you love me, or

that it was all your fault, or all my fault."

"But I..."

"You nearly killed me because you loved me?" asked Saest, angry again. "You leave me trapped here for a year because you loved me? You can't decide whether or not to free me because you *loved me*?" Nes Imosa winced, and backed away from her, but she ignored him. "I can do without that sort of love!"

"Aworo, don't say anything more," begged Nes Imosa. "Just get in the boat."

Back on shore, they parted ways, Nes Imosa to a bath house and Aworo back to the guesthouse common room. Guests sat at a few tables, and over in a corner a knot of men were throwing dice. Aworo ordered cheese and bread and beer and sat by himself for some time, thinking.

Before he'd tried being human, he'd never thought much about Truth in the abstract. Truth was what was, the way things were. Once he'd been human a while, truth became a slippery concept. Things that seemed true were provably not. Convictions presented themselves to him from nowhere he could trace. He'd thought Saest was dead, believed it utterly, and yet it had been untrue, and Nes Imosa was right, he should have known it.

He was afraid to state his motives for anything aloud, because he could never be sure if what he thought was true, or something his human mind had provided after the fact in some attempt to make order out of its own chaos.

Running away from the river that night, he had first been horrified at what he'd done, and the fact that he was running away. By the next day he began to entertain the idea that it had all been beyond his control, not his fault. The teachings of the atheists he'd spent the fall and winter with had reinforced that idea—this world was broken, corrupt. Nothing went as it should. Living creatures were merely following their natures, and no one was at fault but the power that had brought this flawed world into being. And none of it mattered. The only important thing was to purify oneself so that one could shed one's imperfections and reach the universal Truth.

Over at the table where the men were dicing, a familiar voice cried out. Aworo looked up and recognized the man in the green coat, who the morning before had sold the horse he'd claimed was one of Aworo's own.

Before Aworo could get up, Nes Imosa sank into the seat across from him. "You're looking better. Ha ha! Girl! Some bread!" He grimaced. "And a pitcher of water." When the food came he took a chunk of bread. "I don't think I'd like being a god. I mean, I'd like the power, who wouldn't? Girl! Cheese!" He took a swig of water. "Feeling much better now, must be the food. But as I was saying. Can you imagine, never being able to lie?" He laughed. "Oh, ha ha! You can! Well, you can twist words around, but there are some things you just can't get past. But now." Nes Imosa looked up as the woman brought the cheese. "Some of those mussels as well, my dear." He looked around and then lowered his voice. "What are you going to do

about this curse? She's safe as long as she stays on the island, it's true, but I know I wouldn't want to be stuck there. Not if I couldn't leave. Ha ha!"

"The thing is," Aworo said, and then waited as the dice-players shouted, variously triumphant or disappointed. "The thing is, I didn't specify how she would die if she turned away from the river. And I don't know what would be likely to happen right now if she did."

The mussels arrived in a steaming bowl of broth. "Help yourself," Nes Imosa invited. "So is it something that's likely to hurt you really badly?" He picked up an open shell and blew on the meat inside. "If it's something that big, then it's going to cost you that much to begin with, right?"

The mussels smelled good. Aworo took one while he tried to make sense of what Nes Imosa was asking. "Are you asking if since I spent a certain amount of power when I made the statement, it should take the same amount of power to take it back?"

"Ha ha. Right."

"Imagine I'd said that a particular person was dead. And a certain amount of power was to have made that true. How much would it take, for me to take that back?"

"Ah! I see your point," Nes Imosa said genially, scooping up another mussel. "So. I'm curious. Most gods possess a person or an animal some of the time, but that's not what you're doing."

Aworo sighed. "No."

"In fact—correct me if I'm wrong—gods hardly ever use humans that way."

"I wouldn't say hardly ever." The dice players shouted again, and the serving woman brought a new pitcher of beer.

Aworo reached out to fill his cup again, and then remembered the night before and took some cheese instead. "But not like this, not very often."

"So, ha ha! Why are you doing it?"

"Because sometimes—not very often, understand, but it happens—humans do something completely unpredictable. You make such careful plans, and you think you know someone—I can know, from the moment a particular human is born, what they'll look like and mostly how they'll act when they're grown. But sometimes..."

"Ah!" said Nes Imosa. "I understand you. All your ideas about humans are one thing, but being one is quite another. So, what have you learned?"

Aworo took another mussel. "Sometimes I think even humans don't understand why they do what they do."

Nes Imosa grinned. "Ha ha! Nothing I didn't know already."

As Aworo left the guesthouse, he glanced at the green-coated man. But there wasn't time, not if he wanted to see Smerdis.

At this late afternoon hour the market stalls were empty and shuttered, the street eerily quiet, even with people gathered to watch the procession. As he walked by the fountain, he heard a

familiar croak. The frog was still perched in its bowl on the edge of the basin. Next to it sat a young man, pale, almost girlishly pretty, eating something wrapped in bread.

"Aworo!" called the frog. "This is my boy." The boy nodded perfunctorily, all his attention on his food.

"The one who sells your lotion?" Aworo asked. "What does it do, anyway?"

"It smells very nice," said the frog.

The boy swallowed. "It moisturizes and refreshes the skin," he said, his voice surprisingly deep. Aworo couldn't place the accent.

"Isn't he wonderful!" said the frog. "I got him from one of the slave pens down the street. He was a scrawny little thing, the dealers didn't know what they had! Half of what he brings in I spend feeding him, but he sells a lot. Very popular with the women. They love the accent. So where are you off to?"

"I'm here to see Smerdis."

The frog croaked in surprise. "Smerdis!" It shifted uneasily

in its bowl. "Look here, Aworo. I've never met Smerdis, and none of the gods I've asked have either." The boy laughed, at what Aworo wasn't sure. "He doesn't have an account at the temple of the Nalendar, it's in the name of the temple itself, as a business entity. The Nalendar refused to open one if he wouldn't come in person."

"Then where did he come from?" asked Aworo. "How did he get any worshippers at all?"

"How should I know?" asked the frog. "I could give you a string of theories longer than my tongue, but who knows if any of them would be the truth?"

"What if his followers are right?"

What if he's the Supreme? The god of gods?"

The boy snorted and wiped his now-empty hands on the front of his coat. "Smerdis is a fraud," he declared, and before he could say anything else a long chorus of jingling started, and in the near distance, the procession came out from the temple gates and into the street.

First came a dozen men in conventional dress—the coat and leggings most men in the Nalendar Valley wore—shaking long strings of small bells. Behind them, stepping sedately, came one of the largest, whitest bulls Aworo had ever seen. As Nes Imosa had said, its horns were gilded, and they shone bright in the afternoon sunlight. Behind it came more men, singing. "Is that the bull?" Aworo asked. "The one that answers questions?" Spectators reached out to touch it, and the great bull merely walked, slow and calm, behind the bell-shaking priests as they approached the well. Not what you'd expect from a bull. But definitely what Aworo would expect from a bull that was possessed by a god. His breath caught, and his skin prickled.

The priests and the bull were circling the well, still singing. Aworo moved slowly forward and reached out his hand as it came by. It didn't react to his touch, just stepped slowly forward,

The frog croaked in surprise. "Smerdis!" It shifted uneasily in its bowl. "Look here, Aworo. I've never met Smerdis, and none of the gods I've asked have either."

muscles moving and warm under his hand. He looked up at its head, its calm face, its eye...

Aworo dropped his hand and stepped back. Behind him the frog's boy swore. "Hey, watch where you're going!"

"Well?" asked the frog. "What do you think?" The bull was still walking sedately around the fountain, its attendants before and behind it.

"That bull," Aworo said, and then hesitated. But he was sure he was right. "That bull is drugged."

"How can you tell?" asked the boy.

"Its eyes." The singing, and the chaotic jingling, continued, but the procession was moving away, back the way it had come. Aworo shook his head.

"It doesn't necessarily prove Smerdis isn't the Transcendent One," the frog said. "But you'd think the Supreme God of Gods wouldn't have to resort to that sort of thing."

Aworo looked at the boy, who said, "I'm still hungry, can I buy a cake?"

"Yes, my dear, and get a basket of crickets too." The boy ran off into the swirl of dispersing onlookers, and the frog puffed a few times. "So, what about this business with Saest?"

"I'm thinking about it."

"Thinking!" The frog considered that for a moment. "Well, maybe that's best, after all."

Back at the guesthouse, the dice game was still in session, and Nes Imosa was watching it with great interest. "You're back!" he cried as Aworo came in the door. "Girl! A drink for my friend here. And everyone else!"

"You seem to be feeling generous," Aworo said as the woman brought him a cup of beer.

"A salute to Nes Imosa!" called one of the dicers, and Aworo saw that it was the green-coated horse salesman. The other dice-players cheered.

Nes Imosa smiled and bowed. "Ha ha! Yes, I come to Kalub to enjoy myself. So how did your errand go? Did you find what you were looking for?" Aworo hesitated, and Nes Imosa suddenly turned serious. "No simple answer, eh?"

"That depends," said Aworo, surprised, but Nes Imosa's solemn mood was gone as soon as it had come, and his normal genial expression had returned.

The man in the green coat tossed, and then gave a cry of defeat. "I'm out!"

"Pay up!" said another man. "You've been throwing on promises for the last hour."

"I don't have anything!" protested the green-coated man. "I meant to win it back. I'll seal..."

"Cash!"

"I'll go to the temple of the..."

"You won't go anywhere!" said the other man, and stood and crossed his arms. "I want the money you owe me."

The man in the green coat looked over to Nes Imosa. "Friend!

Can I seal a draft for some coins?"

Nes Imosa frowned. "I'm not sure how much I have on me..."

"Nes Imosa, don't," said Aworo.

"I have plenty," said the man in the green coat, "but as you can see, this man—" he gestured to the other man. "Won't let me leave to get it. I'll make it out for whatever you can give me, plus fifty gold more."

"Fifty!" Nes Imosa looked pleased. "That's a nice profit. Let me see what I have." He pulled out a purse and poured its contents on a nearby table, a spill of gold and silver coins and a few coppers. "How much do you owe?"

"A hundred ten," said the threatening man, and the green-coated man nodded.

"Nes Imosa," Aworo began, "this man..."

Nes Imosa dismissed him with a wave. "Now, friend, please don't interrupt." He turned back to the dicers. "So I'll give you a hundred and ten, and you'll seal a draft for a hundred and sixty. Your gambling debt will be paid and I'll be fifty richer! Ha ha!"

"It'll be worth it," said the green-coated man, casting a glance at his antagonist.

"I'll bet it will," said Nes Imosa, and waved over the serving

woman and asked for a tablet. She stood by while the man in the green coat rolled his cylinder seal across the clay, and Nes Imosa handed over the gold.

"Now sir," said the serving woman then, putting her hand on the green-coated man's shoulder. "We'll be off to the temple of the Nalendar." Before he could move she had a knife at his throat. The other dicer swore, and spun around

and ran out the door. "He won't get far," said the woman. "There's half a dozen of the city guard outside."

"What!" exclaimed Nes Imosa. "What's this?"

"You're too trusting, sir." The green-coated man made as if to struggle and she tightened her hold and pushed her knife just a bit harder against his throat. "Move and you'll bleed to death." He stood very, very still. "I've had my eye on this one for a while. You'd have presented that draft at the temple and found there was no money to back it up."

"Look into his horse dealing as well," Aworo suggested.

The woman shrugged. "Not my area." She tugged at her captive. "Come on, you."

As they left, Nes Imosa sank into the nearest seat. "Well!" he said, serious again. "That's that, then. Now, friend Aworo, what are you going to do about lady Saest?"

It was as though Aworo had blinked and his vision had cleared, or as though Nes Imosa had taken off a mask. "Who are you?"

"I'm Nes Imosa," said Nes Imosa. "A foolish merchant from upriver who came to Kalub to take the waters and have a bit of fun." No *ha ha*, only a pleasantly serious expression. "Sometimes—because of my generous nature, you understand—I get swindled." He smiled, but there was no sign

The green-coated man made as if to struggle and she tightened her hold and pushed her knife just a bit harder against his throat.

“Gets hot on the plains,” the boy said. “The sun beats down.” His surprising baritone turned suave and melodious. “It does terrible things to your skin.” He reached into a box at his feet and pulled out a small bottle, black glass wound with a spiral of red.

of the expansive, affable Nes Imosa of moments before.

“Did the Nalendar send you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Why not just say so?”

Nes Imosa lifted his cup, looked at it a moment, and then drank. “You could probably be forced to remove the curse one way or another, but it’s better for everyone if you’re persuaded instead.”

Aworo thought about that for a moment. “Is that a threat?”

Nes Imosa betrayed no surprise or indignation. “Does it sound like one?” When Aworo didn’t answer, he sighed. “Yes, it’s a threat. The island is as much as the Nalendar can do and it’s hardly satisfactory. Saest is unhappy there, and it’s a terrible waste of her abilities, frankly.”

“The Nalendar wants me to just take it back?”

“I’ll be frank, you’re a very powerful god. But so is the Nalendar, and she could probably force you to do what she wants.” Nes Imosa picked up a pitcher, looked inside it, looked around for the serving woman, and then shrugged. “But if you were killed, or too badly weakened, someone else would fill your space. There are several candidates, none of whom appeal to the River Nalendar. She likes stability. Stability means peace and prosperity. Open trade routes.” He set the pitcher down again. “You’re powerful enough that taking the curse back would be a temporary inconvenience. At worst it might jeopardize your hold on the body you inhabit.”

“But I haven’t...”

“Haven’t caused enough trouble?”

“Haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

Nes Imosa laughed. “What is it you’re looking for, Lord of Horses? Do other gods worry about things like that?”

Aworo thought about Smerdis’s bull, shining white, groomed and gilded. Drugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t, before I was human.” He caught Nes Imosa’s dubious look. “Does that mean it’s not a valid question?”

Nes Imosa shrugged. “I have no idea. But I do know that the Nalendar has very little patience for your spiritual crisis. And I’ll tell you what I think. I think it suits you to have Saest trapped on that island. When she can go where she wants, she won’t go where you want her to.”

Angry and indignant, Aworo opened his mouth to protest.

“Don’t speak without thinking,” Nes Imosa cautioned. “Being human is a game to you. You can always try it again some time, if you lose this body. But Saest only has this one life.”

Aworo wanted to say, *It’s not a game to me*. But he knew Nes Imosa was right. “Saest won’t die when she turns away from the river,” he said, and was suddenly sick to his stomach, heart pounding, unable to speak. He collapsed forward, head hitting the table, glad he was already sitting.

“I was going to suggest going upstairs and lying down first.” Nes Imosa’s voice came from somewhere distant. “You’re a little impulsive, Aworo.”

When he was well again, Aworo went to the marketplace.

The summer was well-advanced by now; the heat rising off the flags wouldn’t dissipate until well after sunset, if even then, and the golden roof of Smerdis’s temple shimmered in the afternoon sun. The street was deserted, except for the frog resting in its bowl, chin on the rim, eyes closed, and the boy leaning nearby, drooping in the heat, perceptibly taller than he had been when Aworo had first seen him. He nodded negligently as Aworo approached.

“I’m going,” Aworo said.

The frog opened one eye, and then closed it. “Where?”

“Home.”

The frog opened both eyes this time and fixed its beady gaze on Aworo. “Saest went downriver.”

“I know,” Aworo said. “I hope she does well.”

“I think she will,” said the frog. They were both of them silent for a few moments.

“Gets hot on the plains,” the boy said. “The sun beats down.” His surprising baritone turned suave and melodious. “It does terrible things to your skin.” He reached into a box at his feet and pulled out a small bottle, black glass wound with a spiral of red.

“Clever boy!” said the frog. “You know, Aworo, you could import this...”

Aworo tossed a coin in the bowl and took the bottle from the boy. “I think it’s better if I just go home.”

The frog puffed thoughtfully. “Maybe so,” it croaked. “But what about the god of gods? Truth through meditation?”

Aworo shrugged. “I can meditate on the plains.”

“I imagine so,” agreed the frog. “But where will you get the drugged cattle?”

The boy snorted, limply in the heat, and Aworo looked at him, eyebrow raised. But he couldn’t summon any real anger. “It’s safer if I go.”

The frog wiggled down further into its bowl of water. “For that body, likely. You barely managed to hold onto it. But do you think you’re going to do something this stupid again?”

“Probably not this particular *kind* of stupid.” Aworo brought a handful of water out of the well and emptied it into the bowl. “But I’m not making any guarantees.”

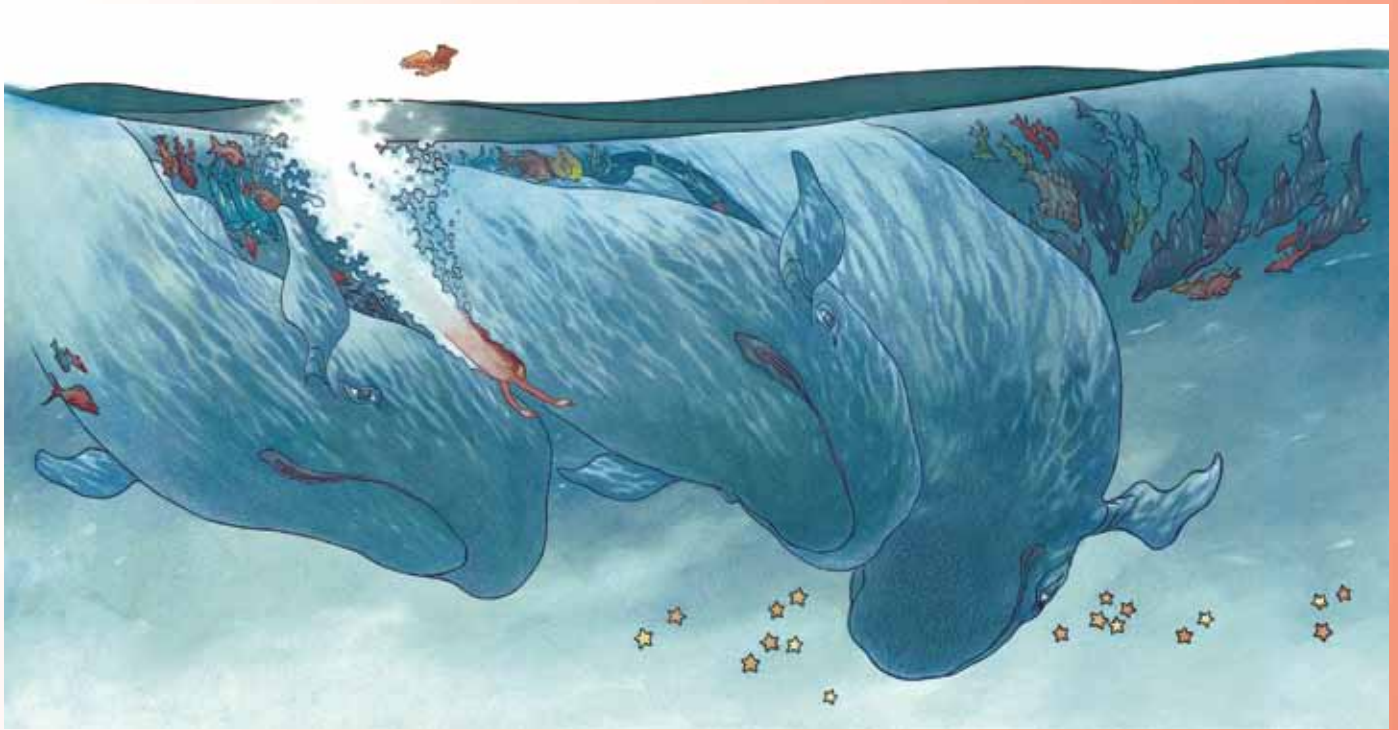
The frog croaked its amusement. “Do I hear wisdom at last?”

Aworo thought of the long ride west, the hills that would give way to his own sparsely wooded plains, his home. He had been away too long. “I hope so,” he said. “I hope so.”

FASCINATING RHYTHM: THE ART OF CHARLES VESS

by Karen Haber





Mysterious forest glades filled with winsome creatures glisten under enchanted lights. Graceful tree limbs curve down to frame cavorting faerie folk dressed in rich colors. Fabled denizens of fantasy tales and ballads stride through these fabulous landscapes, expertly rendered with loving detail by acclaimed artist Charles Vess. For more than three decades, he's been delighting fans and publishers of fantasy art with his romantic, detailed, evocative

illustrations. He's enjoyed a multifaceted career that has encompassed comics, books, movies, museum exhibitions, sculpture, and running his own press. He's garnered a shelf-load of awards while illustrating the work of fantasy masters such as Neil Gaiman, George R. R. Martin, Charles de Lint, and Susanna Clarke. Now Dark Horse Comics has gathered together his Golden Age-inflected *oeuvre* and put it safely between hard covers in *Drawing Down the Moon*, a beautiful 200-page retrospective of his work, with a foreword by Ms. Clarke.

Charles chuckles over the title of his new retrospective. "It took me about two seconds to come up with the title. I draw a *lot* of moons in my work. I had many reasons for doing a retrospective, and foremost among them was the desire to show my evolution as an artist as well as the diversity of what I do. I know from when I was a budding artist, and I looked at art books, they showed the mature artist's work with very little sense of how that skill developed. I wanted to offer more.

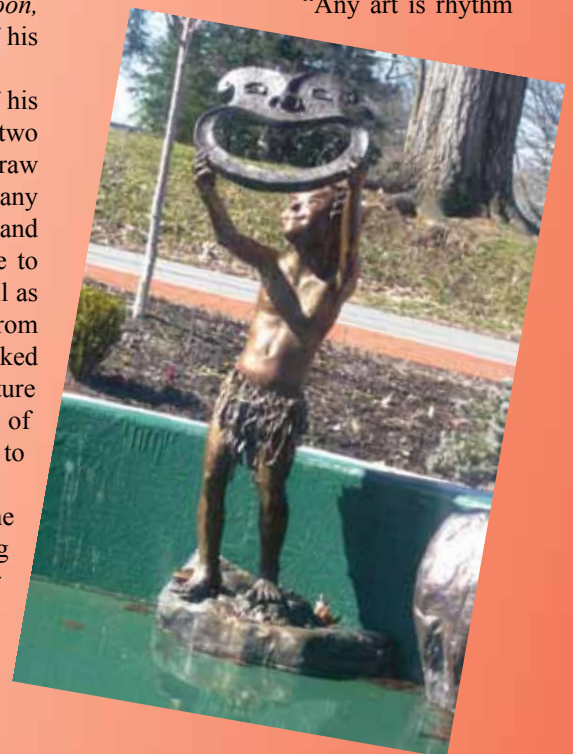
"I can see the change in both the work and technique: The drawing is much more assured in later years."

It's been a busy time for Charles: in addition to finishing *Drawing Down*

the Moon, he's completed—after three years of intense work—the installation of a 16-foot bronze fountain based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and he's just finished illustrations for a children's book, *Instructions*, with text by Neil Gaiman.

Looking at a Charles Vess illustration, one enters a delightful realm in which light and shadow, line and color are perfectly balanced as the artist leads the viewer's eye through his composition.

"Any art is rhythm



and pattern,” he says. “The artist’s decision involves how much you show and how much you don’t show. If you show too much information, you tire the viewer. You have to have that rhythm, the more you develop it, the more you can do.

“I’m very intuitive about composition and color choices. I don’t spend a lot of time considering composition. I just draw until it feels good and the objects are in the right place. I have a very highly developed sense of that, of placement and composition. There are houses and rooms I don’t want to be in because things aren’t placed right.”

Charles’s work is distinguished by his sinuous use of lines and attention to detail, both of which are derived, in part, from his passion for great illustrations of the past.

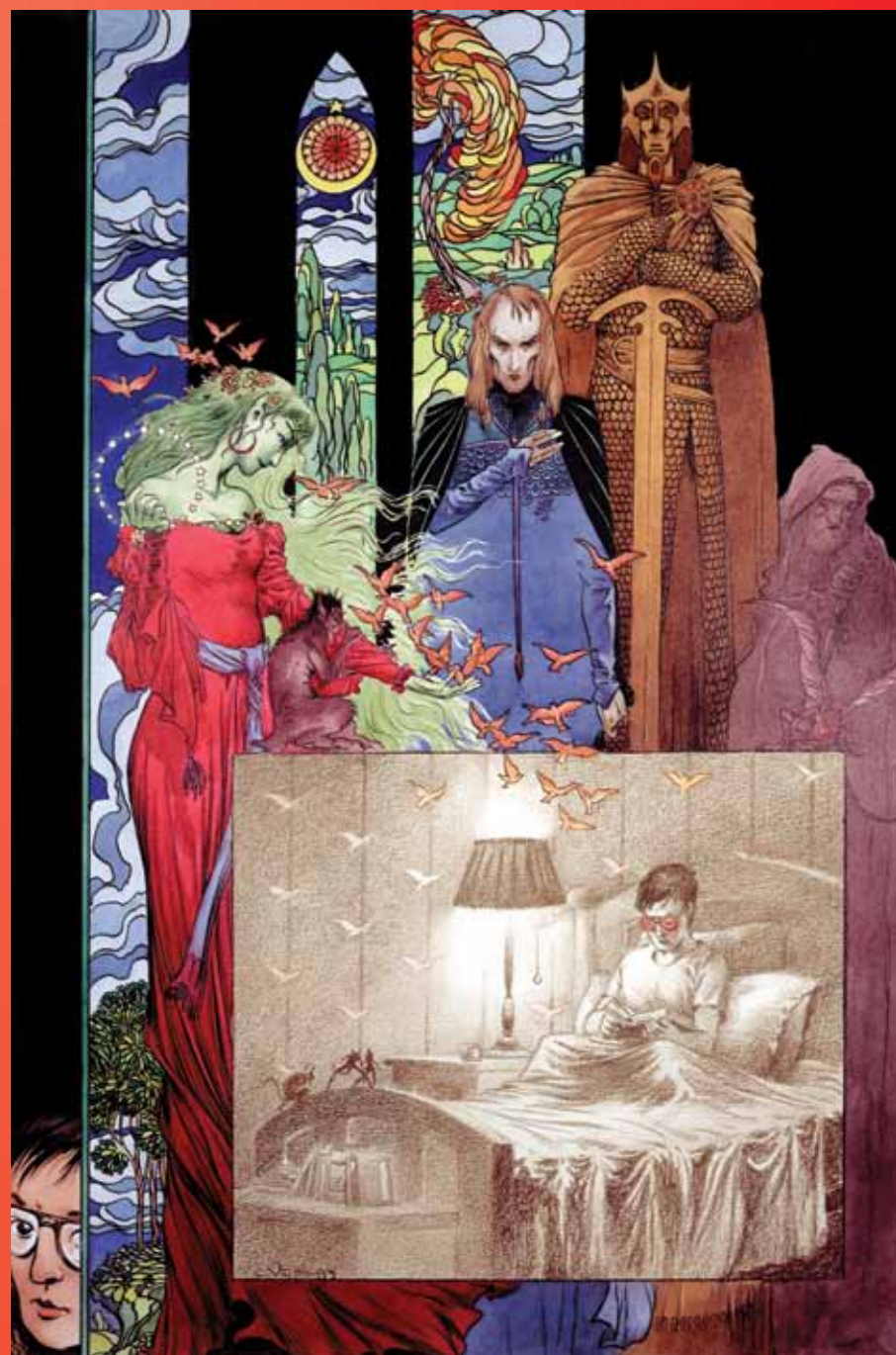
“In the early 1970s I fell in love with the Edwardian book illustrators. Of course, I also loved modern illustrators like Frank Frazetta and Roy Krenkel. But I really feel a romantic connection to Arthur Rackham and the entire history of fantastic art. For a few years I taught the history of fantastic art at Parsons School of Design in NYC in part because I get inspired by these artists and enjoy sharing their work. I love that work, it makes me want to paint, and anything that does that is good. I feel sometimes that I’m engaged in a long metaphorical conversation with all these dead artists.

“When I was growing up, in the late 1950s and through the 1960s, there weren’t any art books on these types of artists. I’d see a painting by Hannes Bok or Maxfield Parrish in an obscure fanzine and wonder who is that? But you’d hit a brick wall in terms of being able to find information. So in turn, I like to make it available. Perhaps one day I’ll do a book on the history of fantastic art.”

Early in his career, Charles worked in comics, eventually drawing for Marvel, DC, Dark Horse, and Heavy Metal. He remembers it as demanding work that wasn’t entirely a good fit for his romantic sensibilities.

“When I worked in comics, I tried various techniques, as my style isn’t really suited for those publications. I think it’s good to go outside your comfort zone, to stretch your abilities.

“Mainstream superhero comics ask



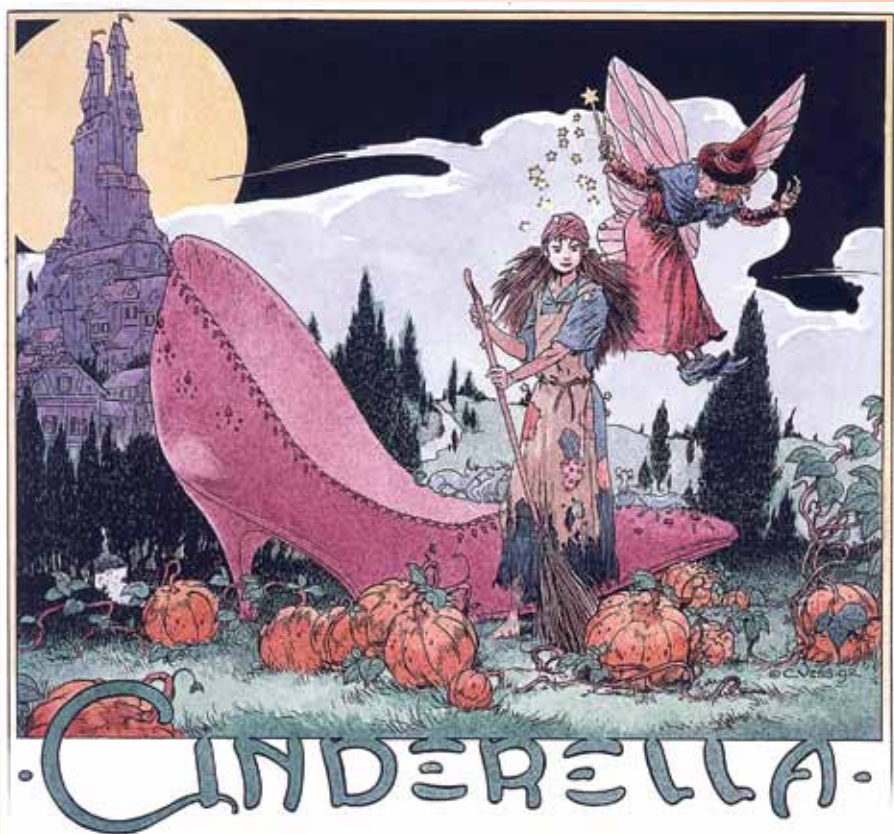
you to draw more than is really necessary. They are also usually a very exaggerated medium and I tend to like more subtle, poetic, atmospheric imagery. I’m definitely a romantic, so I’ve segued into book illustration, children’s books, etc.

“Comics though, do teach you to get it done without models, to draw out of your head, which helped a lot in my evolution as an artist. What I don’t like about superhero comics is that the outcome of the story—who will win and who will lose—is determined by whoever

has the biggest fist, the biggest muscles, etc. I don’t want to endorse that way of thinking because life doesn’t have to work like that.”

Around the time of his work in comics, Charles made two important discoveries: Scottish landscape and Scottish national literature.

“I eagerly sat through the credits of *Dragonslayer* just to find out where it was filmed—on the Isle of Skye. Then I took my Spider-Man money and spent a month in Scotland. I fell in love with Scotland,



the look of it. And I discovered Scottish national writers, and in their literature their landscape was as important as the characters. I responded to that strongly. I like landscapes and people. I'm always aware of the landscape when I'm walking through it, hiking through it. I've always been attracted to trees and rocks.

"When I wrote/drew/painted my Spider-Man graphic novel, *Spirits of the Earth*, I sent him to Scotland where he couldn't just swing away from danger because none of the buildings in that landscape are more than 3 or 4 stories high. He had to survive by his wits, not his web. Although near the end of my tale there he was hammering it out, fist to fist, with the bad guys. Sigh."

Charles is quick to point out that there are other non-Scottish writers, the greats of fantasy literature, whose work lights him up. "That whole string of literature is important to me. I enjoyed reading Mervyn Peake and Lord Dunsany—I gobbled it up. I read Edgar Rice Burroughs, J. R. R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard, even Lin Carter's editorial work with the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series; they influenced me tremendously."

How does he sum up the wisdom of a

life lived in the service of Art?

"The eraser is the most important tool an artist has. You must make difficult choices sometimes. Yes, you must erase, even if it hurts. The best face I ever drew I had to erase, *of course*, because I hadn't integrated the head and the body properly.

"I will sometimes clean up a picture digitally; Photoshop enables you to zoom in and fix it, and digital tools are useful but I'd much rather feel pencil on a piece of paper or a brush in my hands. I prefer the sensuality. Besides, I don't ever want to totally clean something up. I want to play with it, to see the mark of a hand in the work."

One of the developments Charles has

most enjoyed over the years is the option to say "no."

"Early on in my career I had to do science fiction art because I needed every assignment I could get. But I'm not really a science fiction illustrator. I have a hard time drawing cars and buildings, hard-edged things. Somewhere in the mid-'80s I began to be able to say 'no' to such technical jobs. How exciting that was!"

The artist has been known to sneak in portraits of friends, collaborators, fantasy creatures he admires, and even himself into his illustrations. "I oftentimes add small details just to amuse myself. Each time I start developing one of my more complex landscapes, filled with characters, each with their very own stories to tell, I remember going to the dentist as a kid. Seems like I always had a cavity. They had a big map of Nursery Rhyme Land and I would mentally immerse myself in the map to avoid thinking about the coming pain of the drill. I think of that map when I do a market scene. The myriad details are a reward for anyone who's really paying attention."

ON MEDIUM

"Digital tools are incredibly useful. And with them I don't have to worry about shipping the art. But I prefer hands-on transparent media: watercolor, colored inks, watercolor pencils. With them I can layer many different colors. I don't use color theory so much as I just build up layers." Charles's approach to painting landscapes includes both photographs and sketches. "I like to use photos for reference, but I prefer to draw from my imagination. And as I go along I think I'm getting better.

"Doing forty paintings in two



months—for the upcoming *Instructions* book—is something I couldn't have done ten years ago, but thanks to the maturity of my drawing style it was easier to draw this now. Thirty years ago I heard Moebius saying he was very pleased when he got to a point of not worrying how to draw something; I'm a little bit closer to that now."

GREEN MAN PRESS

The first page of the Green Man Press website (www.greenmanpress.com) features a lovely drawing by Charles of the mythical Green Man holding an ear of harvested corn, accompanied by a telling quote from C. S. Lewis, another author whom Charles admires: *"I have seen landscapes...which, under a particular light, made me feel that at any moment a giant might raise his head over the next ridge. Nature has that in her which compels us to invent giants: and only giants will do."*

The website offers an image-intense blog and a listing of Charles's personal appearances and other information including merchandise for sale by the artist. Currently being offered is a handsomely produced boxed set of fine art prints of selected images from the



book, *Stardust*, an award-winning collaboration with Neil Gaiman, that features 175 paintings set within the magical realms of Faerie. *Stardust* was made into a movie in 2007 with a cast that included Robert De Niro, Claire Danes, and Michelle Pfeiffer. These illustrations are quality printed in a limited edition of 300 and signed by both the artist and the author.

Says Charles, "I began Green Man Press in 1995 and quickly realized that it erased lots of barriers. It was interesting: I realized I was doing guerrilla marketing

of my work, and it was fun, but at the end of the day I wasn't drawing, and I'm supposed to draw. The older I get the more I delegate to others. This is the first year I got an agent. I'm trying to do more drawing. Luckily, my wife, Karen Schaffer, is really good at editing, proofreading, and has a very good aesthetic eye for design."

Together, the couple is working on *The Greenwood*, a project that Charles likens to a combination of picture book/novel/graphic novel somewhat along the lines of the Caldecott Medal-winning YA

CHARLES DANA VESS

- Born in Lynchburg, VA, in 1951.
- Drew his first full-length comic when he was ten and called it “Atomic Man.”
- Graduated in 1974 with a BFA from Virginia Commonwealth University, and worked in commercial animation for Candy Apple Productions in Richmond, VA.
- In 1976 he moved to New York City and became a freelance illustrator, working for many publications including *Heavy Metal*, Klutz Press, and *National Lampoon*. His award-winning work has graced the pages of numerous comic book publishers such as Marvel, DC, Dark Horse, and Epic.
- His work has been featured in several gallery and museum exhibitions across the nation and in Italy, Portugal, and France.

AWARDS/HONORS:

The Ink Pot Award: Excellence in Comic Art, 1990

World Fantasy Award: Best Short Story, 1991 (“A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” with Neil Gaiman); Best Artist, 1999

Comic Creators’ Guild: Best Cover, 1993 (*Dark Horse Presents* #75)

Spectrum Annual: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art: Silver Award, Comics, 1995; The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art: Gold Award, Book, 2003; Will Eisner Comics Industry Award: Best Penciler/Inker, 1997 (*The Book of Ballads and Sagas* and *Sandman* #75); Best Painter/Multimedia Artist, 2001 (*Rose*)

Mythopoeic Award: Fantasy Award, Adult Literature, 1999 (*Stardust*, with Neil Gaiman)

Chesley Award: Best Interior Illustration, 2005 (*Medicine Road*); Best Color Work, Unpublished, 2006 (“Companions to the Moon”)

Locus Award: Best Artist, 2008

New York Times Bestseller List: *Blueberry Girl*, with Neil Gaiman, 2009

novel by Brian Selznick, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. Suffice to say there’ll be text and art—lots of it.

COLLABORATING WITH NEIL GAIMAN

“*Blueberry Girl* did so well—five weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list—and really surprised the people at Harper, and they responded, ‘We want another one, and want it right away.’ So Neil suggested adapting his poem, *Instructions*. After we finalized layouts in July, I started painting—almost a painting a day. I worked every single day. It all got done—forty paintings in two months!—and it’ll be out in March 2010.

“Working with Neil is always a treat, although this particular book wasn’t so much a collaboration as it was him handing me the finished poem and me figuring out what to do with it. After Neil saw my layouts he said that he loved what I was doing. Then it was off to the races so to speak. I had a lot of responsibility here, lots of decisions. It was a fun process. Any project that gets me working with words and pictures together makes me excited. I don’t see much difference between comics and picture books and movies—working with words and pictures makes a third world.”

ON FANTASY AND ITS ENDURING APPEAL

“I feel compelled to the fantastic to read it, to draw it, to try to live it. One of the side effects of studying mythology and folklore—if you are interested in it at all, and read a lot of it—is that you are really learning about diverse cultures from all over the world, and getting a better idea of the people in them. Cultures so often tell the same stories.

“I think the roots of fantasy have a very aesthetic/spiritual feeling, a special sense to them that the world is alive around you and has a purpose. Since the Industrial Revolution we’ve sort of ignored that, set humankind as the center of the universe and that’s probably as silly as thinking that the Earth is the center of the universe. Sometimes you have to be just a little tiny speck in the universe to get your perspective. I think the best literature plays into that.”

FUTURE PLANS

“I’d like to do another *Book of Ballads*. I love that music and I found a way to participate in that tradition through the book. You can’t draw music, but I’m not drawing music, I’m drawing stories.

“Charles de Lint and I are expanding *A Circle of Cats* for middle grades. I’ll be doing fifty more paintings for it.

“I’ve done a lot of writing—I’ve got many ideas I’d like to do for children’s books. Writing is something I’ve always done—it’s just been put off to the side. I realized it’s exactly the same process as drawing—just use different adjectives. And the eraser—or delete button—is still your best tool.

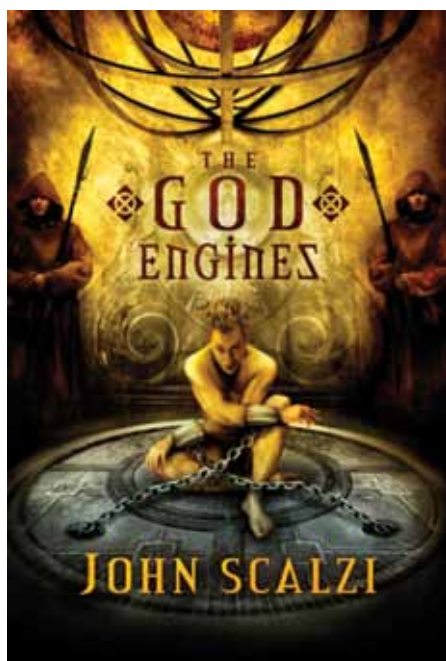
“I had done a sketch in the spring that would be a nice picture, a big 4 x 8-foot watercolor I want to paint for fun. I’ll need to construct an easel first. It’s totally out of my comfort zone, and when I’m done I know I’ll come back refreshed.

“I’d like to do more sculpture. I just completed a major work, my first, a 16-foot fountain called *Midsummer Play* featuring Titania, Puck, and frolicking faerie/woodland creatures. It was commissioned by the Barter Theatre in Abingdon, VA. In sculpting you have a whole ‘nother sense of the figure. I spent three years working on the fountain, shaping the armature, building the clay, pouring bronze, hammering ceramic, welding and grinding bronze. The only thing I didn’t do was the patina. It is a beautiful thing to see, in sunlight, moonlight, even snow. Every day that goes by I forget how much hard work it was, it is that lovely.”

“The reason that Charles Vess draws such astonishing things, such beautiful things, and such strange things so very well is simple. He draws what he sees.”
—Neil Gaiman



Books



Remainder bins are littered with the books of science fiction writers who think their expertise in that genre automatically confers a similar fluency in fantasy. Campbell and Hugo Award-winning author **John Scalzi**'s first foray into fantasy, the grippingly dark and subversive short novel *The God Engines* (Subterranean Press, Burton, MI, hardcover, 136pp., \$20.00, ISBN: 978-1-59606-299-3), will not be among them.

Scalzi brings the hard-edged skepticism of the SF writer to his fantasy universe—a universe that, significantly, resembles a degraded science-fictional universe—that is, it's a universe in which a human empire has spread across the stars via starships...only powered not with science-based technologies but using the intrinsic powers of slave-gods harnessed by means of artifacts and rituals. Scalzi is working in genre drag—not merely adopting the dress and mannerisms of the “opposite” genre but exaggerating them for comic and critical effect. Thus, though *The God Engines* is indisputably a work of fantasy, it is simultaneously a brutal critique of fantasy, a searing evisceration of the valuation of blind faith and magical thinking that underlies so much of the genre, at least at its most popular and

mindless.

Once upon a time, apparently, there were many godlike powers in the universe competing for survival and dominance, but in the time that Scalzi sets his story, one god has emerged triumphant, either killing his rivals, turning them into slaves, or relegating them to the periphery of his ever-expanding empire—an empire administered by the Bishopry Militant and embodied ecumenically in billions of humans whose faith quite literally sustains the nameless god at the top of the heap...who, in turn, provides them with all manner of creature comforts, military prowess, and supernatural talents. But recently, some of the subjugated gods (known as Defiled) that power the starships have rebelled, and the empire is coming under unusual stress from what we discover is a previously unencountered deity whose dominions are now bumping up against that of humanity's god.

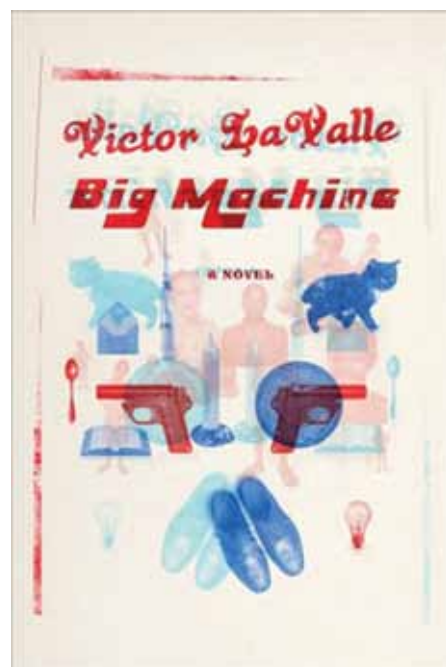
Scalzi brings this cosmic confrontation down to the human level through his viewpoint character, Captain Ean Tephe, whose ship, the *Righteous*, has just sustained a troubling defeat in relief of an attack against the planet Ament Cour. Tephe is a man of strong faith, but he is also, as befits a military tactician and strategist, a man who takes account of things as they are, who tempers faith with reason—which is not to say doubt...at least, not yet. Tephe serves as the reader's proxy, and Scalzi makes him an enormously sympathetic character, not only through his steadfast nature but through the warm, mutually supportive relationship he has with the beautiful Shalle Thew, leader of the rooks—officially sanctioned prostitutes who tend to the bodily and emotional needs of the crew.

Dispatched on a mission designed to procure a secret weapon for his god, Tephe will find his faith tested as never before. First by the Defiled powering the *Righteous*, who seeks, with Luciferian cunning, to undermine that faith just when he needs it most. Then by the priest the Bishopry has assigned to the *Righteous*,

Paul Witcover
Matt Staggs

Croj Andso, a brittle, vengeful man whose faith is sustained by cruelty and alcohol. And finally by certain shocking revelations that he is given prior to his mission, along with other revelations, even more shocking, that will arise in the course of it.

Once these revelations begin, the pace of this short novel accelerates, with a corresponding increase of tension, especially in the taut scenes between Tephe and the Defiled, carrying characters and readers alike helplessly along toward a climax as harrowing as any I have read this year. Along the way, Scalzi takes savage swipes at organized religion and the notion that the proper position of humanity vis-à-vis the divine should be one of humble and/or fearful abasement. Depending on how you read it, *The God Engines* is a grim and tragic horror story or an utterly deadpan evocation of cosmic black humor. Either way, it's not for the faint of heart.



Neither is *Big Machine* (Spiegel & Grau, New York, hardcover, 374pp., \$25.00, ISBN: 978-0-385-52798-9), a rambunctious paranoid fantasy from **Victor LaValle** that is also concerned with the often violent intersection of doubt

and faith. LaValle is a gifted young writer whose work (a novel, *The Ecstatic*, and a collection, *Slapboxing with Jesus*) has met with high acclaim from the literary mainstream. His fiction has always had a feel for the fantastic, an affinity for the strange and supernatural, even if that affinity has been manifest more in language and imagery than in the concrete details of plot. But now he plunges unrestrainedly into the seriously weird, embracing secret histories, enigmatic gods, and fallen angels in a darkly uproarious work whose acknowledged debts extend to Shirley Jackson, T. E. D. Klein, Stephen King, and “my man Ambrose Bierce.” Readers may also find themselves thinking of Junot Diaz, Ishmael Reed, Thomas Pynchon, and, perhaps most of all, Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* shadows this novel “on the lower frequencies.” But this is not a novel in thrall to its influences. *Big Machine* sucks them in, grinds them up, and spits them back out with a joyous, anarchic energy that both illuminates and reflects the demented, violent, and transcendent America that is the novel’s subject: the America forged in spiritual and racial warfare; the America of the homeless and downtrodden; the America of the drug addict, the grifter, the misfit, the preacher, the serial killer, and the dreamer.

Ricky Rice is the novel’s narrator. He’s a middle-aged loser, a recovering heroin addict with a bad knee and a worse history: of small-time violence, low-grade misogyny, and a scarring childhood spent enmeshed in a bizarre religious cult, the Washerwomen, led by three black women, sisters who have rewritten the Bible from the perspective of African Americans (this reminded me of Zora Neale Hurston’s underappreciated reworking of the Old Testament, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*). Ricky is employed as a janitor cleaning toilets in a Utica, New York, bus station until he one day receives a mysterious letter that reads, in full: “You made a promise in Cedar Rapids in 2002. Time to honor it.” Also enclosed is a one-way bus ticket to Vermont—a destination so far removed from anything familiar to a black man like Ricky as to seem almost a foreign country. Nevertheless, he goes—partly because he’s got nothing to lose, but also because the only promise he made in Cedar Rapids had no possible witnesses

except a dead man.

Once in Vermont, Ricky is whisked away to the private grounds of the Washburn Library, an endowed institute devoted to the support of a hand-picked community of researchers, the Unlikely Scholars, who together constitute an oasis of blackness within the austere whiteness that is Vermont. Ricky and his fellow researchers are about as unlikely a group of scholars as can be imagined, with no formal academic credentials and histories of drug abuse and other criminal activity. Now, suddenly, for no reason they can fathom, they have been given comfortable homes, hand-tailored clothes, and well-paying jobs—jobs that consist of pouring through newspapers from across the country, looking for... well, that’s the question.

The answer, when Ricky discovers it, brings him to the attention of the Dean, the seemingly ageless man who runs the Library. The Dean informs Ricky of the Library’s origins and its mission. Back in 1775, an escaped slave named Judah Washburn, fleeing westward for the dubious safety of Spanish-controlled America, was hailed by a mysterious voice, or Voice, that led him underground, to a buried treasure trove, and then sent him back into the world with a mission—yet never spoke to him again.

Judah set up shop in Vermont, one of the only places a black man could be relatively secure in his possessions at the time, and founded the Library, devoted to compiling “an inventory of impossible events” so as to reestablish communication with the Voice. That Voice, the Dean tells a skeptical Ricky, is the voice of a new god, a god for black people. But now, the Dean continues, the Library and its mission are under threat by the current heir to the Washburn fortune, or what’s left of it, who is planning to shut the Library down, and by an Unlikely Scholar, one Solomon Clay, who has gone rogue.

Ricky, teamed with a more experienced Scholar, Adele Henry, an attractive but emotionally remote woman nicknamed the Gray Lady, is dispatched to Garland, California, where Judah Washburn had his encounter with the Voice. There he and Adele are to eliminate both threats.

But what begins as a simple, if violent, mission soon morphs into something far stranger and potentially deadly. Clay, it appears, has mobilized an army of

homegrown terrorists to carry out what he claims is a new commandment from the Voice, while Ricky, who finds himself falling in love with the stony-hearted Adele, draws the attention of supernatural beings called Swamp Angels. These beings seem to be seeking him out for a purpose as bizarre as it is terrifying.

The real voice that matters in this novel is not that of the Voice, never heard directly in any case, but that of the narrator. Ricky is an inspired creation: capable of raw poetry and terse irony, his voice punctures its own affectations and illusions yet still dares to dream. LaValle deftly blends the mysteries of Ricky’s past with the intangibles of his present to craft a searing portrait not only of a man but of an entire country threatened with madness and apocalypse. Despite its fantastic elements, it is utterly of the moment, speaking to the post-9/11 world in which we live...and the future we are building for ourselves. “Doubt,” one of the Washerwomen tells Ricky, “is the big machine. It grinds up the delusions of men and women.” But in the end this extravagant novel isn’t about doubt at all, but rather about its dangerous and indispensable opposite, faith.

My review of **Mark Chadbourn’s** previous novel, *World’s End*, was quite negative, so I was inclined to skip his latest offering, *The Silver Skull: Swords of Albion* (Pyr, New York, trade paperback, 425pp., \$16.00, ISBN: 978-1-59102-783-6), the first of a new series. But I was intrigued by the setting of Elizabethan England and, frankly, seduced by Chris McGrath’s gorgeous cover, which suggests an atmosphere of shadowy menace and plucky swordplay. That suggestion is more than borne out by this marvelously inventive fantasy of a secret war pitting humans against fairies at the same time the Spanish empire is preparing to launch its great armada against England. It’s a dazzling idea, deftly executed, with lots of romance, derring-do, and, as befits a tale of spies, crosses and double-crosses aplenty.

To the public at large, Will Swyfte is England’s master spy, an Elizabethan James Bond, but this is all just a cover: his true exploits, the ones that count, are known only to a few, among them Sir Francis Walsingham, the head of Elizabeth’s secret service, and Elizabeth

herself. These exploits involve a deadly ongoing Cold War between England and Faerie, which for uncounted generations has terrorized and persecuted human beings. Now, thanks to mysterious discoveries by the scientist-cum-alchemist Doctor John Dee, England has been able to hold the fairies at bay, at least from most large-scale incursions. Most humans, even if they believe in fairies, are unaware of how much of a presence they really are—and how big of a threat. And Walsingham is determined to keep it that way, because the mere knowledge of fairies is enough, thanks to their innate eldritch weirdness, to drive people mad. Even those agents, like Swyfte, chosen for their strong will and mental durability, and trained to withstand the corrupting influence of contact with Faerie, almost always succumb sooner or later.

Swyfte's war against Faerie is a personal one: long ago, they kidnapped his true love, and ever since, he has dedicated himself to rescuing her...and to protecting her younger sister, who, in the meantime, not unreasonably, has fallen head over heels in love with the dashing adventurer.

Now a powerful artifact sought by England and Faerie alike, the Silver Skull, holds the balance of power not only in their conflict but in the simmering war between England and Spain, and the Spaniards, despite their professedly devout Catholicism, are not above allying

themselves with Faerie in order to defeat their traditional enemies at last.

Chadbourn's plot moves swiftly, from London to Scotland to Spain, with surprises galore along the way, and with memorable heroes and villains, especially the Faerie prince Caville, who is a worthy adversary for Swyfte, and a promising young playwright and sometime secret agent by the name of Christopher Marlowe. Smart, fun, at times surprisingly moving, and occasionally downright shocking, *The Silver Skull* is impossible to put down.

Daniel A. Rabuzzi makes an auspicious debut with *The Choir Boats: Volume One of Longing for Yount* (ChiZine Publications, Toronto, Canada, trade paperback, 408pp., \$18.95, ISBN: 978-0-9809410-7-4), a muscular, Napoleonic-era fantasy that, like Phillip Pullman's Dark Materials series, will appeal to both adult and young adult readers. There's a Dickensian vibrancy—and messiness—to Rabuzzi's book; it's filled with outsized characters, colorful slang, outrageous coincidences, buried secrets, stunning revelations, and star-crossed lovers. The novel is not an unqualified success; its first half is substantially better than the second, when Rabuzzi's control of his material slips appreciably, leading to a climax that feels forced. There is also an unfortunate conceptual problem, which I will get to below.

The Yount mentioned in the novel's subtitle is what might be thought of in science-fictional terms as a pocket universe, one that has been brought into contact with Rabuzzi's alternate Earth by some mysterious cataclysm. There are two points at which it is possible to sail from Earth to Yount, and vice versa, aboard boats that navigate by means of a process called fulgination, which can involve technology but is also an innate ability of some people and animals. There is a musical aspect to fulgination, and it is this quality that's alluded to in the novel's title.

The people of Yount look to Earth for salvation. It seems they have been imprisoned, cut off from their own world for crimes they don't entirely remember or agree upon. But prophecies indicate that their long exile can be ended by people from Earth, and Rabuzzi's central characters are an extended family who

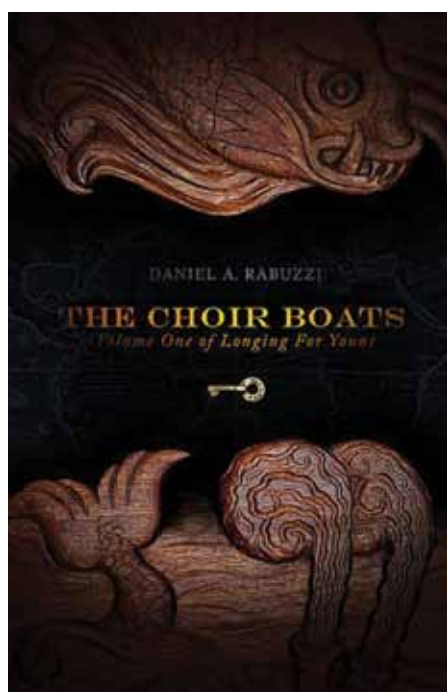
may possess the ability to do just that. Rabuzzi focuses on three members of the family: Barnabas McDoon, a middle-aged man nurturing a guilty secret and a lost love; Sarah MacLeish, known as Sally, his eighteen-year-old niece; and Thomas MacLeish, his twenty-one-year-old nephew. Sally and Tom are orphans raised by their childless, unmarried uncle. A fourth important protagonist is a London street urchin named Maggie, a mathematical genius who was born a slave in Maryland.

Slavery is a central theme of the novel, though this only gradually becomes clear. Not only is it ongoing in antebellum America, where its casual brutalities have tragically marked Maggie's life, but it is also an ugly reality in Yount, where a civil war was fought, and may yet be re-fought, over the issue.

The Yountians who seek the help of the McDoons are opposed by a frightening figure known as the Cretched Man, a once-human wizard of vast age and power who is the servant of an entity more potent still—a monster with the unlikely cognomen of Strix Tender Wurm. But after the Cretched Man kidnaps Tom, he begins to reveal depths of character that lift him above the common run of villainy—and such is his charismatic appeal that he comes close to walking away with the novel. His origin proves to be both surprising and thematically fitting, and underscores the extent to which the novel draws on Judeo-Christian myths and beliefs; at times it veers more toward allegory than fantasy, but Rabuzzi keeps pulling it back.

Sally is a kind of counter-balance to the Cretched Man. She is, on the whole, less interesting, but that may be because her personality is not yet formed. She is a young woman still growing into the adult she will become, and her heart has not yet been scarred and made cautious. Her brave willingness to love and trust others takes her into some emotionally and physically dangerous places, but it also makes her a heroine worth rooting for.

Rabuzzi's alternate England of 1812 is one that is familiar not only because of its correspondences to the historical England of that time, but also because many of the literary creations of our world have a historical reality in his imaginary one,

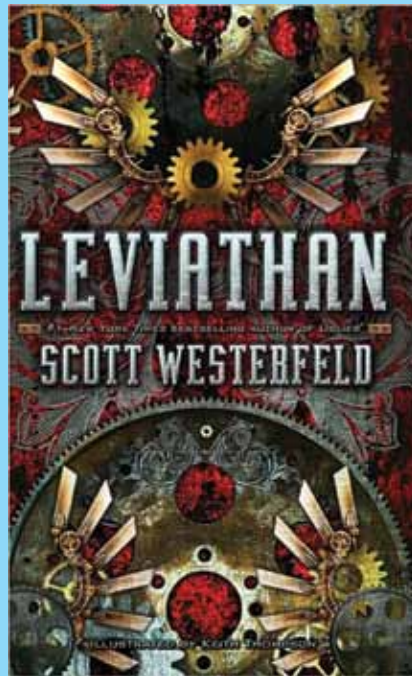


YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS

BY MICHAEL JONES

Leviathan, by Scott Westerfeld, Simon Pulse, New York, hardcover, 448pp., \$19.99, ISBN 978-1-416-97173-3

It's 1914, and the world is about to erupt into war. On one side, the British Darwinists, who use genetically engineered creatures for everything from manufacturing to warfare. On the other side, the Austro-Hungarians and Germans, who prefer to use Clankers, machinery with a steampunk sensibility. On one side, Deryn Sharp, a fourteen-year-old girl, has just entered the British Air Service disguised as a boy, where she ends up assigned to the *Leviathan*, a sky-whale in service as an airship. On the other, Prince Alek Ferdinand, only survivor of the Austrian royal family, is on the run with a few family retainers, one step ahead of those who would kill or use him. When Alek's and Deryn's paths cross, they form



an uneasy truce in order to protect the *Leviathan* as it seeks to complete a vital mission. This isn't the World War I you read about in school. This is a brilliantly conceived, exquisitely executed, "barking mad" alternate history as only Westerfeld could pull off, and it is one hundred percent awesome. A series of gorgeous, evocative drawings by Keith Thompson enhance the overall experience, letting us see the bizarre animals and machines for ourselves. This is one of the strangest, neatest, best books I've read all year.

Ballad: A Gathering of Faerie, by Maggie Stiefvater, Flux, Woodbury, MN, trade paperback, 360pp., \$9.95, ISBN 978-0-738-71484-4

Bagpipe prodigy James and his best friend Deirdre thought attending Thornking-Ash School for Music would

Unlikely searchers:
Twylgalit...sent by the
trees to find a champion
Rafi...a young gryphon
allergic to magic
Jody Burns...wants to
get back to shopping at
the mall

What can you do when not even the trees listen?

"...a great read for teens who love fantasy."
- Gretchen, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

"...There are talking trees, dryads and magical powers...
Great fun!" - Lesley, *Eternal Night*

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ISBN: 1-59279-917-5 (Paperback)

Winner of the 2003 Dream Realm
Award for Best Anthology



The Crystal Throne

ISBN: 1-59279-085-2 (Electronic)
ISBN: 1-59279-942-6 (Paperback)

Winner of the 2002 EPPIE
Award for Best Fantasy

be quiet and faerie-free, following the tragic events of the summer before. If anything, life is about to get even more complicated. While Deirdre is stalked by the Fae for her ability to see and influence them, James is seduced by Nuala, a leanan sidhe who exists by inspiring and draining musicians. Against all reason, James and Nuala genuinely fall for one another, even as Deirdre loses herself in her problems. With forces conspiring against them all in the hope of creating a new status quo for Faerie, can James save his best friend and his new girlfriend, or will his choice doom one of them? Stiefvater's follow-up to *Lament* weaves suspense, romance, and music together to deliver a thoroughly satisfying story. James and Nuala are a charming, perfect couple, which makes Deirdre's plight throughout the book all the more worrisome. Give this one a shot.

***The Splendor Falls*, by Rosemary Clement-Moore, Delacorte Books for Young Readers, New York, hardcover, 528pp., \$17.99, ISBN 978-0-385-73690-9**

After a nasty injury ends her career, teen ballerina Sylvie Davis is sent to recuperate with a cousin in Alabama, where she can try to mend both body and spirit. What she discovers is a rich family history she knew nothing about, an area plagued with ghosts, centuries-old secrets, and not one, but two guys who want to get close to her. Is Sylvie losing her mind, or is she coming into a power she never dreamed existed? Her cousin is willing to assume the former, but Sylvie's pretty sure she's sane, sober, and clean. To get to the heart of the matter, she'll need to develop a connection to the land, solve a decades-old mystery, and trust the sexy Rhys, a Welsh student who clearly knows more than he lets on. No matter what, the balance of power in the area will never be the same again. An atmospheric, even Gothic deviation from her Maggie Quinn series, *The Splendor Falls* is another excellent offering from Clement-Moore, infusing Southern folklore and history with a captivating, supernatural tone.

***Hush, Hush*, by Becca Fitzpatrick, Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, New York, hardcover, 400pp., \$17.99, ISBN 978-1-416-98941-7**

Nora Grey's orderly existence is thrown into upheaval when her new biology partner, a sexy transfer student named Patch, begins stalking her. Alternately frightened by and attracted to Patch, Nora can't get him out of her life or her mind. As strange things occur and attempts are made on her life, Nora has to decide if Patch is the threat she suspects him to be, even as other suspects surface. But can she survive being a pawn in a game between fallen angels? Awkwardly poised between romantic and disturbing, the mystery-laden plot and atmospheric setting make this a strong, if not spectacular, debut for the author, who shows a lot of potential.

***Devil's Kiss*, by Sarwat Chadda, Disney Hyperion Books for Children, New York, hardcover, 336pp., \$17.99, ISBN 978-1-423-11999-9**

As the newest squire, and only girl, in the modern-day remnants of the Knights Templar, Billi SanGreal is under a lot of pressure to live up to her family's legacy, even though she'd rather lead a normal life. However, there's no end to the fight against Evil, especially when one of the Templars' greatest enemies returns, intent on revenge. Now Billi and the other Templars are in for an epic battle, with the lives of millions at stake. What price will be paid to keep London safe from a horror of Biblical proportions, and what will this do to Billi's chance at love? *Devil's Kiss* reads like Buffy crossed with *The Da Vinci Code* in some ways, but swiftly creates its own memorable identity. Chadda is an author to watch.

***Devoured*, by Amanda Marrone, Simon Pulse, New York, trade paperback, 304pp., \$9.99, ISBN 978-1-416-97890-9**


After taking a summer job at a local amusement park to keep an eye on her boyfriend (who may be cheating on her), Megan's life takes on a rather ominous tone. First, the ghost of her twin sister Remy, who died nine years ago, is appearing more and more frequently, wailing portents of doom. Second, there's just something *wrong* about the Land of Enchantment and the family that owns it. Murder, magic, and mayhem are afoot as Megan and her friends are caught up in the malevolent attentions of a centuries-old creature that inspired a popular fairy


tale. To break the spell, Megan will have to trust Luke, whose ability to see ghosts may be the key to saving the day. Eerie and unsettling, *Devoured* mixes ghost stories with fairy tales with considerable success, continuing Marrone's winning streak.

***Never Cry Werewolf*, by Heather Davis, HarperTeen, New York, hardcover, 224pp., \$16.99, 978-0-061-34923-2**

After Shelby gets caught with the wrong boy once too often, her parents send her to Camp Sweetwater, hoping some tough love will straighten her out. Instead, she meets Austin, the enigmatic son of a rock star, who's also secretly a werewolf. To help Austin keep his condition under wraps, Shelby's about to break all the rules yet again. But if she's made a mistake this time, she'll have far worse than teen boot camp to worry about. Anything's possible in the deep, dark woods, after all. A charmingly cute, fast-paced spin on Little Red Riding Hood on one level, and a werewolf-themed romance on another, this is a quick, but thoroughly enjoyable read.

***Once a Witch*, by Carolyn MacCullough, Clarion Books, New York, hardcover, 304pp., \$16.00, 978-0-547-22399-5**

Alone among her magically gifted family, Tamsin Greene has failed to develop a Talent, causing her to pull away from them in hopes of creating a normal life. However, while working in the family bookstore, she takes advantage of mistaken identity to accept a job retrieving a mysterious item, promptly plunging her into an age-old saga involving magic, time travel, deceit, prophecy, and destiny. What has her family kept hidden from her all these years, and what will be the cost of learning the truth? With plenty of twists to an engaging plot, it's never quite obvious where the story is going until it gets there. Toss in some fun character interaction, and you have something reminiscent of early Nina Kiriki Hoffman. 

Michael M. Jones, writer and book reviewer, lives in Roanoke, VA, with a herd of cats, a vast mountain of books, and a very patient wife. He's sworn not to die until he's finished reading his backlog of books. His ever-growing archive of reviews can be found at www.michaelmjones.com. 

both as facts and fancies. For example, secondary characters from Dickens novels are encountered as secondary characters in Rabuzzi's book, and, even more strikingly, the story related in *The Lord of the Rings* is here a part of England's own legendarium, as if there had not been a need for Tolkien to invent it.

It's hard to know why Rabuzzi chose to make this metafictional move. It doesn't seem integral to the plot, yet it complicates the novel's central conceit, which is that there are multiple realities, of divergent concordance, intersecting and diverging from each other. Rabuzzi, whether he means to do so or not, is staking a claim to the effect that his fictional universe is the primary one, containing, in their pure and original forms, as realities, what in secondary universes, like ours, are mere echoes scribbled down by subcreators like Dickens and Tolkien. It's a ballsy claim that colonizes or appropriates the work of better writers than Rabuzzi has yet shown himself to be. That's one strike against it. But even worse, it seems to have been done impulsively, as a kind of shout-out, without thinking the implications through. It's a small yet telling flaw that mars the book on a foundational level. Nevertheless, I was impressed by Rabuzzi's sprawling imagination and more than ready to follow his appealing cast of characters into the next volume of their adventures. ☺

Paul Witcover is the author of the novels *Waking Beauty*, *Tumbling After*, and *Dracula: Asylum*, and the collection *Everland*. He is also the author of *Zora Neale Hurston*, a biography. He lives on the edge of Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York. ☺

This Crooked Way, James Enge, Pyr, Amherst, NY, trade paperback, 414 pp., \$16.00, ISBN: 978-1-59102-784-3

James Enge returns with *This Crooked Way*, another tale of Morlock Ambrosius: master swordsman and magician, semi-legendary bogeyman, and embittered, dry drunk. In the previous book, *Blood of Ambrose*, Morlock saved the young ruler of the Ontilian Empire, King Lathmar VII, from the murderous designs of his uncle, the Lord Protector. Following a bloody civil war and a battle against the otherworldly entity proven to be the true

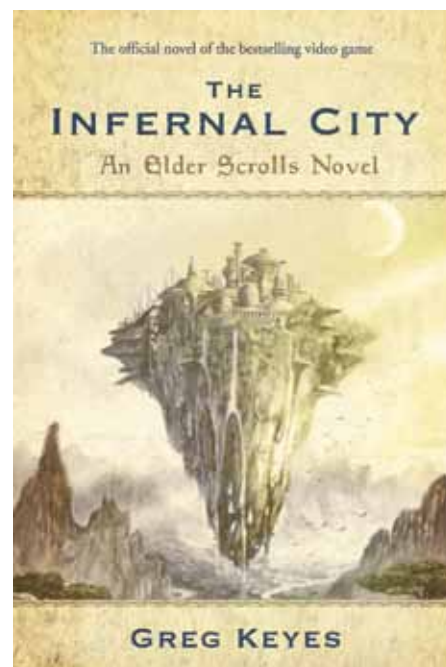
power behind Lathmar's usurper uncle, it had appeared that Morlock may have found a home at last. For a restless soul like Morlock, nothing could be less desirable or perhaps more frightening. An exile following the events of *Blood of Ambrose*, Morlock has wandered far from the reaches of the Ontilian Empire. Velox, Morlock's phlogiston-charged, near-indestructible steed from the first novel has been stolen and only one person could successfully do such a thing: Morlock's father, Merlin Ambrosius. The quest to recover Velox pits Morlock against enemies old and new, including a hideous race of dragon-riding insect creatures that threaten to overtake the world of man. While Morlock prevails against his supernatural foes, his personal demons prove to be a tougher challenge. The ultimate loner, he finds his sense of detachment put to the test when a family rescued from a bloodthirsty cult comes to depend on him for their safety.

A "fix-up" novel, *This Crooked Way* brings together stories previously published in *Black Gate* magazine with plenty of new material, binding all of it together in a way that's pleasantly reminiscent of the old Lancer/Ace paperback *Conan* series edited by L. Sprague de Camp. Through his continuing adventures, Enge's Morlock is seen to grow and mature into the kind of hero that, while capable and deadly, retains a spark of vulnerability and pathos that endears him to readers.

The Infernal City: An Elder Scrolls Novel, Greg Keyes, Del Rey, New York, trade paperback, 304 pp., \$14.00, ISBN: 978-0-345-50801-0

Set after the events depicted in the bestselling fantasy video game *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, *The Infernal City* finds the people of the land of Tamriel once again facing a supernatural threat that could destroy their world. An enormous floating city appears in the air above the land of Black Marsh, a backwater far from the concerns of the empire inhabited by a mix of human outcasts and the reptilian Argonians. Called Uriel, the city settles above Black Marsh and releases a swarm of creatures that slay everyone in sight, harvesting their bodies for purposes unknown. Soldiers sent in to stop the forces of Uriel are also killed, but then

reanimated as part of an unstoppable undead army. A bright but bored young woman named Annaig and her Argonian friend Glim slip away from the conflict but find that they cannot desert their loved ones to the ravages of Uriel. After quaffing a flying potion, the two land within the city's boundaries where they are taken prisoner, separated, and put to labor. When Annaig's talent for alchemy is uncovered, she is chosen for a prestigious but dangerous role: a chef within the city's hellish kitchens. There she works to please the palates of Uriel's demon lords with a myriad of raw materials harvested from Tamriel, the worst of which are the souls of intelligent beings. Meanwhile, Glim's aquatic propensities land him in the city's nursery, where he discovers a disturbing secret about the origin of Uriel's inhabitants. A rescue plot unfolds when the Emperor's son Prince Attrebus receives a secret message smuggled out of Uriel by Annaig; but will the untested prince be able to save them or Tamriel in time? Sadly, the answer isn't revealed in *The Infernal City*. Readers are left hanging when the action comes to an abrupt stop, presumably to resume in the coming sequel. Keyes is an extremely talented author with an overall good sense of pacing and an imaginative story to tell, but running headfirst into a cliffhanger ending like this might irritate some readers enough that they may want to wait until the second book is available before diving in. — By Matt Staggs. ☺





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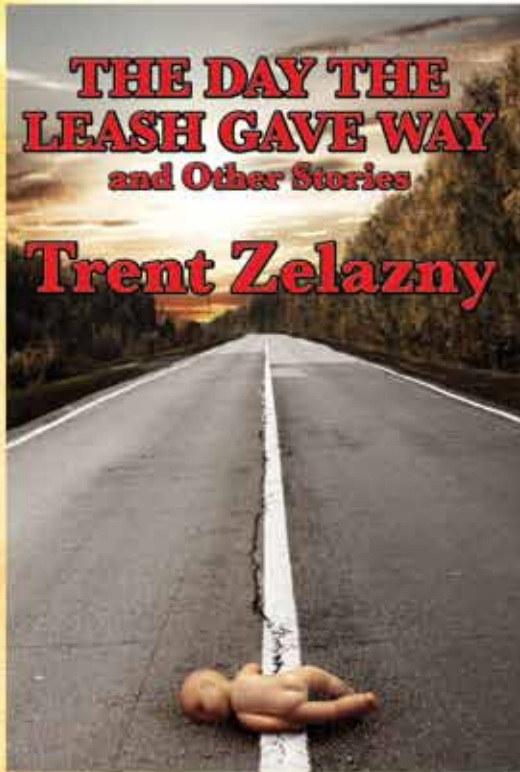
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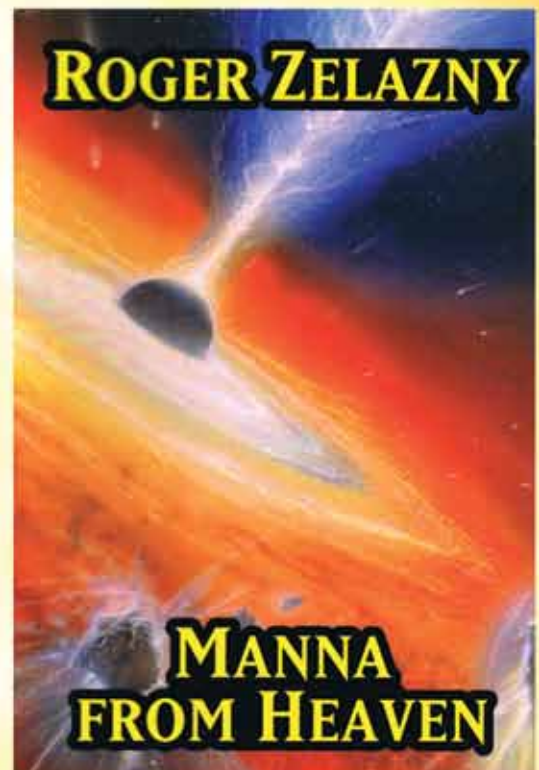
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